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My Best Girl

'I THOUGHT I HAD YOU THIS TIME, MAGGIE!" OBSERVED MR. SMITH
DRILY.

MY BEST GIRL

By KATHLEEN NORRIS



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MY BEST GIRL

CHAPTER I

EE, that is pretty!" said Mary Margaret Petheridge Johnson, in an awed whisper. Small, shabby, alone, and shuddering with pleasurable excitement and chill, she hung upon the gate of the paternal residence and paid to the miracle of paling and brightening lights and colours in the gray world about her an involuntary tribute of delight and reverence. "Gee, that is cert'n'y swell!"

For, behind her shabby little back, and the draggled strings of her shabby little kitchen apron, and the carelessly massed ringlets of her tousled little head, the sun was rising. Over the western hollow below her, where the city was spread like a map, over the roofs of houses and the bared black branches of win-

ter trees, and over the squarely built mass of walls and angles that represented the business district, far downtown, the shafts of strengthening light were creeping in a blood-red glow.

The Johnson cottage, trapped like a forlorn little elderly pioneer between cheaply pretentious neighbours, flimsy apartment houses, and flashy, second-rate stores, stood at the very top of a steep city block, and so was straight in the path of the wheeling spokes of the sun. The rising glory, at first tipping only the treetops and the highest buildings, sank lower and lower, flashing from the cottage's humble windows, streaking the wet sidewalk with clear shadows from the fence itself and from the gate upon which a girl's little figure was silhouetted.

Beyond the cottage, toward that eastern sky that was split now by darts and arrows of unbearable splendour, the hill fell away again, between more dingy houses and shops, to the piers, and toward a spiky fringe of masts and cranes, dim and tangled on the blue edge of the bay, but the cottage faced west, to the city, along the track of the rising sun.

It was a meek, self-effacing little dwelling,

disreputable, lacking paint, giving the impression that its dismal, dirtily curtained little bay window, and its chipped side porch, and its miserable kitchen entrance propped precariously on poles were all about to collapse together and follow the rank and neglected garden as rapidly as possible back to the jungle. A crazy fence still held in some sort of check the fierce sprays of the roses and the packed tangle of fuchsias and marguerites and strong-limbed geranium bushes; dirty pampas plumes collapsed upon their bases of dusty ribbons, the malt bottles that had been inverted years before to form a border to the central path were blackened and loosened at all angles-like a mouthful of defective teeth.

Behind the cottage was a low row of miserable outbuildings, none able to stand alone, each one yet managing to afford a wretched support to its neighbour; sheds, barns, and chicken fencing, connected by evidences of sporadic attempts to establish a carpenter shop—a machine shop—a poultry yard.

But such equipment as had been abandoned there was rotting and unused, and only a few wet, tight-packed feathers on the frosty earth gave evidence that there had ever been fowls in the shed.

On this cool winter morning, a light from the kitchen window lay warm and yellow across the brightening yard, and a cat, huddled disgustedly against the closed kitchen door, mewed occasionally in a protesting and affronted fashion.

The two figures that were at the street gate, however, saw and heard nothing of this. Their backs were turned squarely to the east; their eyes upon the great bulk of the city, emerging slowly, ponderously, almost ominously, from the shadows and the silence of the night.

One of them was a small cur dog, his head thrust through the gap left by a missing slat, his ears alert for trouble, his tail quivering with interest in, and general approval of, the arrival of a new day, with all its promise of companionship and adventure. The other figure was that of Maggie Johnson.

She hung on the gate, in a pose of bent knees and hooked elbows made familiar by many long hours of childhood and little girlhood, when this coign of vantage had been her favourite spot from which to study a large and bewildering world.

Not that she usually saw it at sunrise. No; this was the first in many weeks of cold, for-bidding, black mornings, when her earliest duty—to rush to the gate for the milk—and the coming of the day had chanced to coincide to the fraction of a second. The miracle had caught her in its toils; she was held here, marvelling and wondering, her small body shaken with the early morning chill, to be sure, but thrilling too to a consciousness of miracle and promise in the air, and the touch upon her bared head of a wandering breeze that spoke once again of shepherds, and a stable, and a star.

"It's pretty," she said aloud, in a dreamy voice, as the gold flashed on distant windows and dripped through trees, and the familiar silhouette of the city grew more and more recognizable. "It's like it was a big tide—washin' everyone along before it!"

For, as she hung there, tranced, whistles far away and near by shrilled the quarter before seven o'clock, and the early workers in factories and in the big machine shops began to

gather visibly in the streets. From other gateways almost as small and shabby as the Johnsons', men made hurried dashes, and the tenement district a few blocks away emitted a black stream of life that thickened as it moved sluggishly toward the hungry maw of the city.

For a few minutes, their shadows moved, long and red, ahead of them. Then it was day, ordinary, commonplace, work-time again, and Maggie, rousing herself with a guilty start from the luxury of dreaming, returned to her household cares with the velocity of a little dynamo. It was not often that her mood and her duties trapped her into anything so pleasant as a waste of time; the morning flight to the gate in bitter winter dark was always accomplished in the briefest possible space, and in full summer it was usually made in broad, uninteresting daylight.

The sense of beauty and adventure was still strong upon her as she caught up the quart and the half-pint bottles that respectively supplied the Johnsons with their breakfast milk and cream, and fled back to the neglected kitchen, scooping the outraged cat under her free arm as she reëntered the house.

There was everything, domestically speaking, to be done in the kitchen, but nobody in Maggie's seventeen years had ever done it, or even half done it, and the wild disorder troubled her not at all. The walls were waterstained, and smirched from sticky hands and splashed liquids; the floor was merely oilstained splinters, the chairs and table the shabbiest of their kind. In the sink were the piled dishes and pans, not from one, but from many meals—they were always there, it was the Johnsons' comfortable habit merely to shake loose from the mass the particular knife or pot needed at the moment, and wash it, or go through the motions of washing it, before using it again.

Much stained tea towels, dimly recognizable as originally linen and originally white, hung casually on knobs or trailed from chairs; the window shade was halfway up, cracked and tilted; the little shelf, above the sink, was crammed with freight—an alarm clock, spice boxes, paper bags, curls of string, newspaper clippings, medicine bottles, a broken tumbler with cloves and garlics in it, an almanac, a calendar, pill boxes and pencils, a dried pen

and a dried ink bottle, and several other trifles dear to the heart of Maggie's mother, who was not only a natural hoarder, but who hated to have to take an unnecessary step in the discharge—or rather neglect, of her household duties.

Maggie, however, saw nothing amiss in the brightly lighted scene to which, drunk with the beauty of the sunrise, she hastily returned, and nothing pathetic or futile in the tasks to which she instantly addressed herself. At seventeen, a peculiarly youthful and innocent seventeen, she was not analytical. She had spent every night of her life under this low, old-fashioned cottage roof; she had taken her first steps, a fluffy-headed, eager toddler of thirteen months, on this same chipped, oily kitchen floor; and the dirt and disorder that Ma and Liz created in their wake and spread about them instantly were one of the simple and unavoidable conditions of her life. The world beyond the broken scallops of the garden fence was growing bigger for Maggie every day, but the cottage was always home, and home was a place where things couldn't imaginably be different.

Two dangling electric bulbs flooded the kitchen with light, and the kettle, wrapped in an up-pouring geyser of gas flame, was boiling noisily. Maggie had to push aside the sugar bowl and the blue plate of stale and broken soda crackers, to find room on the cluttered table to cut the fresh loaf; she had to unearth the coffee-pot from the confusion of the sink and rinse away the cuff of black grounds from its spout before she could mix fresh coffee and set it on the stove to boil.

This done, she seized an instant to run into the adjoining bedroom and whisper, to the accompaniment of vigorous shakings, into the ear of the man who lay asleep there:

"Seven, Pop! Lissen—seven o'clock!"

The man, a small, huddled, insignificant figure in the close gloom of the ugly little room, roused himself alertly. The double bed's other occupant also roused, groaned, and Maggie's mother stirred reluctantly and asked anxiously, apparently out of deep slumber:

"Maggie, how's the Mayor?"

"I didn't have time to look, Ma. But don't get up," the girl urged her, concernedly. "I'll

bring you in some breakfast, and the paper too!"

"It don't seem right you should," Mrs. Johnson said perfunctorily. "Leave the shade up, dear. I've got to go out this morning." She pulled the extra pillow behind her shoulders, and propped herself comfortably, half upright. "Is 'Lizabeth up?" she asked. "You make her do her share! The worst of house-keeping," Mrs. Johnson, who had a very slight acquaintance with the subject, resumed, sighing, "is dividing up the work so one don't get it all. I was thinking," she said, returning without effort to the subject nearest her heart, "that it'd be a frightful thing if the Mayor died to-day and they had to bury him the day of the Mardi Gras Ball."

Maggie, arrested by this, stood in the doorway a moment. Her drab little father, snatching an armful of drab garments, had disappeared in the direction of the bathroom, and her mother, snipping now at her nails with a tiny curved scissors, appeared to be in an unusually friendly mood.

"Would they have the funeral anyway, Ma,

even if it was the day of the big Charity Ball?" she asked seriously.

"Well, this weather," Mrs. Johnson mused, "you could put it off until Wednesday, maybe. But it'd sort of spoil it, there's so much going on in the churches, just before Christmas. And I was going over to Oakdale Wednesday. However, I could go Thursday, I guess. You could 'phone for me—my dress'll surely be back then, anyway—only they say there's no luck in a four-day funeral. A man your father had home for dinner once . . ."

Maggie, too well accustomed to these rambling dissertations to waste time in listening to them, had returned to the kitchen. Now she called in cheerfully:

"The headlines say the Mayor had a comfortable night, Ma! Doctors pronounce worst danger past, aged mother leaves Portland home for boy's bedside."

"My gracious!" Mrs. Johnson commented discontentedly. "But they would have had the services at Grace Cathedral," she mused, "and it's undergoing repairs—I was up that way yesterday. So maybe it's just as well. As

like as not they'd have had to have it in Greenbury, and I do hate crossing the bay, this weather. I remember when Senator Phillips died—you never saw the like in your life . . ."

Her voice rose and fell. Maggie pried the little cardboard caps from the milk and cream bottles, scattering their white contents in little jerked blots on the table. She poured her father, who came noiselessly out in his postman's gray, a cup of smoking coffee, poured herself a glass of milk, and put the toast and butter between them.

Len Johnson sat down cautiously, sent an interrogative glance to the bedroom door. He was a small, timid man, with strands of silky hair brushed damp and neat across the shining bald dome of his head.

"Mad?" he asked, without sound.

Maggie set down her glass, looked straight at him, looked at the bedroom door, and shook her head.

"You wakin' her up——" Len Johnson breathed almost inaudibly.

"She didn't care!" Maggie shaped the words with her lips, rather then said them.

"O'Connor funeral!" she murmured. "She's got to get up anyway."

Len Johnson, who rarely spoke aloud in his own house, had only time to nod an elaborate and relieved "I see!" in answer to this, before Mrs. Johnson, lured by the appetizing odours kitchen-ward, appeared majestically in the doorway.

A worn and spotted kimono was wrapped about her, her rich dark hair was in disorder, her eyes were fixed steadily upon her husband's shrinking form. Maggie leaped to her feet, and as her mother, who was an enormous woman, sank heavily into the vacated chair, she busied herself with the coffee-pot and sacrificed, without a second's hesitation, the toast she had made for herself.

While she spread fresh slices on the oven grating, she watched both parents uneasily. Her father, pretending to eat and to act naturally, was smitten as a mouse might have been under the eyes of a cat; her mother, automatically stirring her coffee and reaching for sugar and cream, never moved her gaze from him.

It was not a reproachful or menacing gaze;

on the contrary, it was as still and deep and placid as a mountain pool. Mrs. Johnson's lips were lightly closed, her nostrils dilated with her even, heavy breathing. There was neither hurry nor agitation in her regally calm manner, she held her head high, kept one hand upon her coffee-cup as upon an anchor, and studied her husband thoughtfully through slightly narrowed eyes.

"I could laugh at this," she said presently, in a clear, rich, rolling voice, every word enunciated. "I—a Petheridge—eatin' in my kitchen! And waitin' on me—is my daugh-

ter!"

"Never mind, Ma, I love to!" Maggie said hastily and placatingly. But it was no use. Her mother's words were flowing on as grandly as the billows of the sea, while the older woman's glance swept the cluttered kitchen with an expression of amusement and scorn.

"Throw that dirty tablecloth over the sink, Maggie," she said, closing her affronted eyes, a faint wrinkle appearing on her forehead. "I can't—and I won't—sit here and look at them dishes any longer! This don't seem

funny to Maggie, Len," she resumed, as Maggie rapidly and apologetically obeyed, "but—considerin' the home you took me from, and the way things was there, I should think it'd seem funny to you! Don't it?"

Len Johnson, who had been rapidly and inconspicuously progressing with his meal during the preliminaries of a familiar conversational gambit, started nervously as the last word was shot at him, and said humbly and anxiously:

"Indeed it don't, my dear! You're quite right, I think we get along reel well—considerin'."

Mrs. Johnson's outraged eye met that of her younger daughter, and Maggie summoned a sickly amiable smile to meet the haughty and indeed dangerous expression on her mother's face.

"Considerin' what?" the older woman asked with quiet menace.

Len Johnson's eye in turn sought his daughter's, and Maggie's beautiful thick eyelashes approached each other just the reassuring fraction of an inch, and she almost imperceptibly nodded.

"Well, whatever there is to consider, Ma!" she said briskly and cheerfully.

"Considerin' that your sister is entirely beyond our control, and don't pay no more attention to the father and mother that bore her than the babe unborn—considerin' that you are slavin' away the best part of your life in a five-and-ten store," Mrs. Johnson took up the challenge with deadly readiness, "and considerin' that your father, who was supposed to have a fine future in a bank when I married him, as God is my judge, and as I set here this minute—Maggie," she broke off the automatic and quite unattended tirade to ask suddenly, "what are them cotton gloves like, at the Mack?"

"I didn't hear you, Ma, I was talkin' to Pa," Maggie said, interrupting the undertone conversation she had indeed been enjoying with her father.

"Gimme some more coffee, will you, dearie?" her mother said, doubling a slice of soft, fresh toast about a slipping lump of butter, biting into it deeply without moving her eyes from the newspaper, and sighing. "Yes, my mother was never without help in her

kitchen," she went on, in a sorrowful rather than angry voice, "and I can always say that I had a lovely home—nobody can ever say 'no' to that. My mother had a girl named Lulie—Louise her name was, but we all called her Lulie. 'Lulie, is dinner on the table? Lulie, what time will you have them towels washed?'—How often I've asked her things like that!'

Maggie split the hot shells of her father's boiled eggs, scooped them into the cup that was already half filled with crumbled bread and seasoning, smiled at him her own peculiar, dewy, significant little smile.

"Pop, I'm workin' to-night. It's Sat'day. Are you on late?" It was hardly above a murmur, it did not in the least interfere with the majestic monologue of the lady of the house.

"Shall I wait for you like I useter, dearie?"

"No—you get comfortable an' read your paper after dinner. Murphy comes right to this corner—it ain't so far, anyway. You'll be on for the Christmas rush next week, anyway."

Maggie, still finishing her own perambulatory meal, carried a handful of dishes to the sink, turned on the hot water, made an ineffectual struggle against its disorder. "Leave it be," advised her mother, looking up from a fond contemplation of the death notices. "You can't handle it and nobody couldn't! 'Man's work is from sun to sun, but woman's work——' My God! One of them Cannons that lives over on Bank Street was struck down in the street yesterday and is expected to succumb to internal injuries and severe contusions of head and scalp! What do you know? I wouldn't wonder would they have the whole fire department out for that boy—his grandfather was Chief Rogers."

The stream went on and on. Maggie under cover of its absent-minded meanderings, gave over her struggle at the sink, washed her hands at the faucet with a piece of yellow soap, pulled a small and shabby hat, once her older sister's, tightly down over her thickly coiled hair, and hung up her disreputable apron. She was slipping her arms into a thick, clumsy coat—also a discard from her sister—when, reminded perhaps by the garment of its important first owner, a change came over her face, and she said in consternation:

"Oh, heavenly day! It's five past eight, and Liz says to wake her at ha'f-pas' seven!"

"There you are!" said Mrs. Johnson triumphantly. "If I don't do a thing in this house, it don't get done! Poor Liz, what's Maggie got on her mind, that she can't remember a little thing like that?" the mother demanded pathetically, apparently of space itself, for Len Johnson was not listening, and Maggie had rushed from the room. "I've been married twenty-two years, an' I've had my share, an' yet everything is up to me, an' if things go wrong, who's blamed? Me. I look at other men, an' then I look at mine, an' I say, 'What is he made of? What is he made of that he can see his daughters workin', his wife overwhelmed by-" He's gone," Mrs. Johnson finished uncomplainingly, realizing suddenly that she had the kitchen to herself. "No matter. He don't mind what I say."

She reached for the coffee-pot, poured herself a third cup. Maggie certainly made delicious coffee. The child was a born cook—probably a Johnson rather than a Petheridge tendency.

"For heaven's sake, what is it, Maggie?" Mrs. Johnson interrupted her complacent musings to scream agitatedly. "Don't come

flying out of rooms that way—you'll have me in a faint on the floor. What's happened! What is it!"

"What's happened is that Liz Johnson and all her bedclothes are down on the floor!" Maggie answered, doors slamming violently behind her, voice tearful with rage. "And the next time she wears my only silk stockings, I'll have her arrested—that's what's the matter! I went without lunches four days for those stockings, and she's got 'em full of runs, and I want to tell you— Where's Pop?" she interrupted herself, suddenly calming. "Has Pop gone?" she demanded blankly, her angry face taking on an almost ludicrous look of concern and disappointment.

"Maggie, I wish you wouldn't be so sharp with 'Lizabeth," her mother said, protestingly; "it's common to have two sisters always squabblin'. If she borrowed your stockin's—"

"Borrowed! You might as well borrow a waffle," Maggie burst forth scornfully. "You might as well borrow a bath! How long ago did Pop go?"

"Just a minute. Hand me the bread, Mag-

gie, and put that back to boil up again. Put a little water in it—that's right. Goodness you don't have to slam things round so—it isn't often that I ask you to help me," Mrs. Johnson said.

"I can catch him—good-bye, Ma!" Maggie called, her voice coming back on the wave of cold air that was admitted by the opening kitchen door. The sound of small, stamping feet on the garden path was ended by the slam of the closing street gate. Then those footsteps blended with thousands of others, with the clang of car bells and the honking of motors, and the world had swallowed up Maggie Johnson for another working day.

Mrs. Johnson sat on dreamily, munching and pondering. Maggie and the man of the family had to punch time clocks at half-past eight. But Elizabeth, the older daughter, could saunter down to the beauty parlour where she "demonstrated" a complexion cream, at any time before ten. Patrons of beauty parlours are not early risers, and Elizabeth was the spoiled member of the family, sleeping late, home early in the afternoons, and privileged by the elegant nature of her

profession to spend as much time as she liked in beautifying her own person.

She came out now, tousled and sleepy as her mother had been, and wrapped, like her mother, in a soiled kimono. 'Lizabeth, torn by a rending yawn, bent her close-bobbed head over her mother's full, adoring, upraised face, received a kiss scented with butter and coffee, and sank into a chair. She somehow found room for her slim elbows among the disordered plates and cups on the table, buried her face in her hands, and appeared to return to slumber where she sat.

"Oh, Lord, I'm dead!" she said simply.

"Have good time last night?" her mother

asked, rattling sheets of newspaper.

"Time of my life. Oh, Lord, I'm dead. I got a cold, anyway. Helen's got her death of cold. Chess Rivers was just in from Denver, and he's just about dead!" Elizabeth said simply, obviously undisturbed by these mortuary details. She secured her coffee, her cold toast, and her own sheet of paper. "Of course that young one would let me sleep!" she muttered resentfully.

"The Mayor's better. His mother's on her

way here now," volunteered Mrs. Johnson, with her mouth full.

"That O'Connor funeral ought to be some funeral, Ma," the daughter suggested.

"They say she feels so terrible she has to have a day and a night nurse," Mrs. Johnson agreed. "They're going to have Untermeyer at the organ. What do you suppose they'd pay a man like that for a funeral, 'Lizabeth?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Ma, Miss Foster has picked her bridesmaids, and she's left Gertrude Galsinger out—what do you know about that?"

"They say the four children are all going to be in the front pew—if that wouldn't break your heart!" Mrs. Johnson said, lazily sweetening a fourth cup of coffee. "I don't see why people play up their griefs that way! The place for those children is at home, and if they were my children, that's where they'd be."

"Ma, you ought to get a Jap in here. This place looks something awful!"

The older woman continued to crunch and read, unruffled. Her first-born could do no wrong.

"I know it, 'Lizabeth. But two dollars a day! My God, you wonder what next! 'Two dollars a day for what?' I asked one of them. 'A few dishes,' I said, 'and to sweep a cottage of five rooms—why,' I said, 'it's child's play. When I first was married,' I told him, 'I could get a girl for fifty cents a day!'"

'Lizabeth was paying no attention. It was warm, it was comfortable in the untidy room; the sun was shining brightly now on the frosty, shabby side yard. The cat was curled on the windowsill, looking wistfully out, the dog was asleep in a patch of thin sunshine.

"It seems like Maggie thinks of nobody but herself," her mother said, out of a long pause, "and that's the truth!"

But fortunately for Maggie, it was only on rare and terrible occasions that her mother and sister agreed in criticizing her. Now Elizabeth came indifferently to her defence.

"You'd stand up for her, of course," Mrs. Johnson commented in resentment.

"Well, she don't get many breaks!" Elizabeth repeated absently.

"Poverty is a curse, all right!" Mrs. John-

son presently responded vaguely. But her daughter had heard this remark so often that it made no impression, except, perhaps, that of deepening the formless discontent that was one of Liz's most marked characteristics.

CHAPTER II

S for Maggie, she had long ago shed the home atmosphere as if it were a garment, and was assuming her personality as the least-paid and hardest-worked drudge in the big department store of Mack & Merrill quite as briskly and as definitely as she assumed the enveloping apron of coarse ticking in which economy and custom decreed that such a drudge should appear.

She had danced along the frosty winter street beside the bent, meek little figure of Len Johnson, postman, chattering, with her usual eager rush, of everything in general and of themselves in particular.

"There's our house, Pop, the one we chose. I think the family's back. Anyways, the nurse and the baby is back—when I came home last night that whole floor was lighted up, where the nursery is—where you and I said the nursery was, I mean. Look, Pop, I think they're painting that apartment house—see

the ropes and planks there? A girl that works for the Mack says that they charge twenty dollars a room, five rooms a hundred dollars. Isn't that fierce? Her aunt is going to get married, and she says she's going to tell her friend that it's only sixty-five until they're married and moved in, and then, if he doesn't like it, he can lump it. Pop—if Liz ever married . . ."

Len Johnson made almost no response to the chatter. She was always like this, her eyes, her voice, her feet eager in the rush of joyous vitality that marked, for Maggie, the rise of every new day. She hung on his arm, sometimes dancing about in front of him, so that their progress was delayed for a few seconds, sometimes merely jumping up and down as they went, with sheer exuberance of youth and life. Dimly, mildly, the meek little man enjoyed it, vaguely conscious of the fact that this energetic little daughter, with her emphatic little vigorous voice, her massed chestnut hair, her big eyes so ready to reflect anger or delight, interest or scorn, and her useful, clever, grimy little hands, was the one pleasant -the one uniformly affectionate and sympathetic personality among all the shapes and shadows through which his humble path moved.

But even he took Maggie largely as a matter of course. 'Lizabeth was the family beauty, aristocratic and exacting and discontented. like her mother, and poor Minnie—well, she hadn't made much of a match when she had chosen Leonard Johnson, and she had never let him forget it. They had had a few years of real unhappiness, when Minnie's resentment and ambition had forced him into work he could not do, when the rent of a larger house and the salary of a servant had ridden him like a nightmare, when little 'Lizabeth and little Len had been small and troublesome, and debt and dissatisfaction on all sides had made an actual hell of his uncomplaining life. Then, suddenly, everything had slumped together.

Leonard junior had died, 'Lizabeth had been critically ill for months, bills from doctors, undertaker, nurses, hospitals had accumulated like autumn leaves, and poor Minnie's anger that there was to be a third child had

added the last touch to her husband's despair.

They had tumbled out of the big house somehow, tumbled into the little one; the cottage's five rooms had been disorderly, uncomfortable, crowded with the furniture that had overflowed from the larger place. Minnie, in that same dark, tumbled bedroom off the kitchen from which she had impressively emerged this morning, had quite unexpectedly brought a second daughter into the world, a tiny girl, born too soon, and promising to quit the world as unceremoniously as she had entered it.

When Len Johnson reached this stage in his memories now, he would always stop, with a little awed and rueful laugh deep in his heart.

"We didn't know then that she was—Maggie!" he would whisper amusedly, almost with a little awe.

Who indeed could have dreamed that that gasping mite, that little "drowned rat," as the doctor hastily summoned from the corner had called her, that scrap of wailing humanity wrapped casually in big blankets and tended casually by the witch-faced old Italian

woman from next door, was going to turn in a few years to definite, companionable, loving, eager little Maggie?

After the general collapse of the family fortunes and the loss of her only son, Mrs. Johnson had made no further efforts to plant and foster her husband's business ambitions. or to hold up her own head in the world. She had slumped into shiftlessness, untidiness, and inefficiency; she had grown softer, stouter, more complaining with every passing year. Bills were paid or they were not-it made small difference to her; meals were served from the pots or from the bags in which they came home from the grocery stores; if Len didn't clear the table, perhaps 'Lizabeth would; and if neither did it, Maggie always filled in the gaps. Life scrambled along somehow in the Washington Avenue cottage, and almost every day there was a funeral somewhere worth seeing.

Minnie Johnson, forty-six years old, liked funerals because the padded spacious seats in the churches were much more comfortable to her enormous bulk than were movie or theatre seats, because churches were warm and filled with soft, soothing music, and because the spectacle of burial and grief was almost always interesting and frequently downright thrilling.

She liked weddings, too, but weddings were more exclusive, more crowded, less accessible generally. A strange woman was not always welcome at a wedding. But her imposing, black-clad bulk was an addition to any scene of mourning, and she was often gravely escorted to the front pews and established among the members of the bereaved family itself, merely on the strength of her decent and sober demeanour as she entered the church. When she was away all day and returned to the cottage at night so weary that she had to go straight to bed, and have her hot-water bottle, and some strong, very hot tea with cream and buttered fresh toast, then Len and Maggie and 'Lizabeth knew that she had actually been invited to the ceremonies at the grave, and had been driving for hours with other solemn, dignified persons like herself, discussing the merits and the family affairs of the deceased, whom she had never seen in life.

"Did'j' cry, Ma?" Maggie would ask interestedly.

"Never you mind whether I cried or not!"

"You'll get bawled out some day, Ma. Some member of the family will come up to you while you're giving a last sad look and ask you how you get that way?"

Mrs. Johnson, magnificently consuming the fresh toast and very hot tea, her frozen feet planted upon the hot-water bottle, would toss a confident head.

"Don't you worry about me. A young man did do that once—it was at the funeral of Dr. Somerton's wife, and the papers said 'funeral and interment private,' so I stopped in at the house."

"You didn't!"

"I say I did.—Pull that shade, Maggie, and while you're up get me some more butter.—Certainly I did. And I was standing in the parlour looking down at her when one of the sons touched me on the arm, and he says, 'Would you like to go upstairs and speak to Papa?' 'No,' I says, 'I won't intrude on his grief.' 'What was the name, please?' he says to me, 'for it was her desire,' he says, 'that

everything should be as private as possible, with only the family and a few intimate friends.' 'She was an intimate friend to me, all right!' I says, and the tears come into my eyes. 'Nobody will ever know,' I says, 'what an angel of goodness that woman was to me! Trouble,' I says to him, 'that you're too young to understand.' 'I think Papa'd like you to stay for the services, if that's the case,' he says to me, in a gentle sort of way. And stay I did, and afterward didn't I make the old doctor himself drink some hot coffee before the long, cold drive?"

If Maggie and 'Lizabeth went into disrespectful gales of laughter over their mother's exploits, and even the timid little husband and father ventured upon an uncertain smile, Mrs. Johnson was affronted. Her own calm and regal self-confidence were matched only by her tremendous bulk.

"Mamma'll give up the funeral of her oldest friend, if there happens to be a bigger one on the same day!" Maggie asserted delightedly. And yet she considered the dismal tendency as rather admirable in her mother, and when there were defective black gloves or

ribbons or veils marked down far below cost, at the Mack, she always brought her mother fresh supplies of them.

This morning she parted from her father, as usual, before the black, unadorned, swinging doors of the general post office, a grimy region of spattered ink and spotted blotters, spittoons, and warning signs, and small, guarded windows, and flashed upon her own way, to the much more inviting scene presented by the Mack.

There were life, animation, gaiety here, although, to the street, the Mack's many windows presented their usual unfriendly night aspect, lights out, shades drawn, tables of merchandise veiled with dismal lengths of unbleached linen. It was not yet nine o'clock, the twenty-five minutes before the clock struck would be used by a hundred Mack employees in restoring the place to its daytime aspect and girding themselves for the long pull of the day.

Maggie, penetrating to an odorous basement room that smelled of disinfectants and face powder and wet towels and highly scented soap, found some forty of her associates surging about, changing their clothes, powdering their faces, gossiping, laughing, and quarrelling as they pinned on paper cuffs, manicured their flame-tipped fingers, and adjusted carefully curled bobs.

She put her hat and coat and lunch box into her own locker and slipped off the draggled satin dress, once 'Lizabeth's, that she had worn to work. A big apron of colourless, shapeless mattress ticking went over her head, and Maggie stepped out of her shabby high-heeled shoes and stepped into the disreputable pair that alone made comfortable the thousands of steps that she would take to-day.

The walls of the dressing room were of brick, painted a dirty white, and broken by lockers and mirrors. In the passage at the top of the flight of brick-walled stairs that led up to the store was a nail, and Maggie took from it, with the expertness of long usage, a handful of scraps of paper and began without further preamble the business of the day.

"Say, did they get a new boy in here in Jimmy's place? Where is he—where's Mr. Lilley? They want ink, blue and black—" she was crossing the passage—"and salt boxes —the ten kind. Mr. Lilley! Did they get a new stock-room boy-are you the new boy? What's your name? Joe, huh?" She had brought up with a bump against a tall young man, and now she raised her blue eves from her memoranda and smiled at him as she went on, "I guess you're the new boy? Joe Grant, huh? Were you workin' in a department store before? You weren't? Well, see here—these are the stock orders. Ink, see? And salt boxes, see? They're all down in the basement, you'll get on to the way they're fixed in no time. You want to get about three boxes of the ink, and then take 'em to Lilley or Murray and have him sign for them. I'll do these—you do those—take that one, too. And then the girls will yell at you whatever else they want, or there's a nail back there where they file 'em, or you just come to me. Get a crate of the salt boxes-

He stood looking at her, bewildered, his puzzled, mutinous eyes far above her small head, bent to study her notes. Suddenly someone shouted something at her, and her head came up, and her voice with it.

"Say, lis-s-s-ten! How do you get that way,

Josie? I haven't got my night file cleared yet, and this new feller hasn't never worked in a place like this before, and we've got to do all this first! That shipment of meat choppers never came in, anyway! All right—all right, Mr. Lilley, I'm on my way down there now! Come on, Joe," she added casually, "we might as well do the candy first, since they want 'em for the window, I'll hand 'em down to you and you check 'em off. Don't be any dumber than you can help, becuz they're always in a rush for the night orders!"

He looked at her, affronted by a sense of being belittled, but she did not notice him. Enveloped in her preposterous apron, 'her small hands fairly flying, her crown of chestnut braids becoming slightly dishevelled, and her cheeks getting red with her exertions, Maggie Johnson was all superbly indifferent to what he might be feeling or thinking.

"Here—be careful with those boxes, Joe. If you spill this stuff you pay for it. What's the next? 'Matinée Habits'? Oh, those are chocolate bars—didn't you ever eat one? Gee, you are dumb!"

CHAPTER III

T was noon on the same day. There was a forty-minute interval for lunch, and the new boy was lounging, bitter, disgusted, against a strip of dirty, disfigured brick wall that had once been painted white. It was quiet, here in the basement, on this dreary winter day; there was a sort of prison stillness, of prison isolation, among the roped boxes, the enormous crates, the great rolls of ginghams, woollens, and towels that were stored here in the gloom, like the bodies of slain giants. Their very wrappings, of tarred paper and heavy string, had to be torn away by the strongest men that the Mack Merrill Chain Stores could find for the purpose. They looked as if human hands would be helpless against their elephantine inactivity.

Far above his head, the boy could hear the healthy one-o'clock roar of the store, beating rhythmically, like the sea upon a deep shore. "Zoom—zoom—zoom!" went the babel of voices, the shuffling of feet, the tingle of a

hundred cash registers, the click of pottery, the brief horns and grinding brakes of the river of motor cars in the street.

He was a dirty boy, and a shabby boy, this Joe, but there was some poetry in his soul, and he thought of the taxicabs now, and the jammed street cars, and the ferry boats, as so many rivers pouring living waters, living flesh and blood, into the great main sea of the Mack.

They called it "the Mack" for brevity, did the thousand and one employees of the chain stores, all over the big city, and as Joe Grant had been one of their employees for four hours now, he too began to think of the enormous, octopus-like institution as "the Mack."

He was away from it all for the forty minutes of his lunch "hour," but it seemed all to be with him still—the noise of it, the confusion, the horrible smells; smells of cheap perfumes and cheap soaps, of wintergreen scented household cleaners and lyes, of chocolate and coffee from the packed luncheon counter, and peppermint and clove from the banks of candies into which bright little shovels plunged and plunged all day long.

It was his first job: he told himself that at nineteen he was too old for it. Or perhaps he was too young for it. Anyway, it wasn't the right job for him.

He had tried for others before taking it. Tried for "decent" jobs, with some advancement and dignity to them. But this, handy man in the Mack, appeared to be his level, at the moment.

His eyes ranged gloomily over the merchandise that was stacked and heaped about him. White pine buckets and buckets and buckets of candy; lollipops, jelly beans, "French mixed." Beaverboard boxes of biscuit; gingersnaps and lemon frosts and fig bars. Crates marked "baking dishes," "lace collars," "writing tablets," "greeting cards." And on all of them the ciphers of the house, mysterious cryptic signs like "LXX" and "CTXX" and "O.K.Daly."

"Gosh, what a mess about nothing!" the boy said, half aloud.

A gong, above him, behind him, somewhere up the wide, dirty, utilitarian brick steps that rose steeply between two marred and grimy white brick walls, rang twice. That meant that the second lunch shift was due to report upstairs and relieve the third. The boy heard it, but he did not move in its direction.

Instead, he took from his pocket a small folded yellow envelope of stout brown paper and looked within it. It contained money—three dollars, some cents. He had been working a day, or he would have been working that long, when the store closed to-night. His pay was at the rate of twenty-two dollars per week.

He had dropped the torn envelope and was putting the money into his pocket when a sound in his neighbourhood made him turn suddenly, at the foot of the stairs. He was not, apparently, the only occupant of the basement.

Backing cautiously out across the heavily wrapped bundles that were a dozen times the size of her small body was what he at first supposed to be a child. A small grimy girl-child, her upper person encased in a sort of mud-coloured ticking, her skirts protected by a firmly pinned width of burlap, her heavy stockings the worse for wear and wet, and holes worn through the very centre of that pair of disreputable shoes, backing toward him, that had first indicated her presence.

Once fully in view, he recognized her at once. It was Maggie.

"That was a job for you!" she said panting, explanatory, raising to his eyes as beautiful a pair of blue specimens as he had ever seen.

"What was?" he asked, at a loss.

Her own eyes became slightly bewildered, slightly suspicious, in turn.

"Weren't you waitin' for them ideel leaf-

lets?" she asked.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about!" the boy answered.

Maggie, straightening herself rapidly, with a sort of general shake and bounce, asked patiently:

"Didn't you hear the gong?"
"Sure I heard the gong!"

"Well, don't you know you'll get fined if you're not in your place when that rings? Here—take these," the girl said expertly, plunging into an opened crate, securing some dozens of small frying pans, all tied together by the eyes in their nickeled handles, and cramming them into his arms. "We'll say we were after stock," she explained rapidly.

She had loaded herself with kitchen

brushes; now she started toward the stairway. "Follow me, an' I'll get us both out of it!" she promised, confidently. "Don't you say a word, Joe, I'll run it!"

Joe, who was tall, found himself smiling for the first time in the Mack store, as he looked down upon her and duly followed her small, flying figure. She went up the stairs almost at a run; the brushes were tied into great bundles of perhaps fifty or sixty, and how, overbalanced by them, she navigated the crowded aisles of the store above, Joe could not understand. Following her was an easy matter; he kept close behind her with his own load of jangling frying pans. She stopped only once.

"Mr. Smith," she said, in a businesslike tone to a certain argus-eyed, pimpled floorwalker who arrested her with a sallow hand, "me an' Joe here was gettin' out some stuff for the house furnishin's when the gong rung

-will you check us in?"

Mr. Smith eyed her with suspicion.

"I thought I had you this time, Maggie," he observed drily, displaying a wrist watch.

"No, sir!" the girl answered sturdily, hon-

est blue eyes on his face. "We was gettin' out stock."

"All right, all right," he said challengingly, "but who asked for them brushes and pans?"

"I don't know, sir. Someone just yelled down when I was finishin' my lunch."

"Well, I guess I'll just step over to the house furnishing with you, Maggie," the man said unpleasantly, "and we'll see if we can identify the order. How'll that do?"

"I don't know who yelled it," the girl murmured sulkily, resentfully, as they went on their way. And Joe saw that she was trapped.

But evidently her courage revived when they reached that churning, convulsed department that was devoted to house furnishings: a sea of crowding buyers, brushes, egg-beaters, pans, heavy glasses, paper napkins, ropes, and clothespins. One customer had considerately set an enormous suitcase in the aisle, and it was upon this that Maggie mounted, while she launched her cheerful challenge:

"Say! Which of you girls ast for fryers an' brushes? Me an' Joe've got 'em here, anyway!"

"Get down offa there!" the outraged cus-

tomer directed her. But not before Maggie's irresistible smile had caught the eye of Kate Cullen, the stout, intrepid, terrible old woman who was one of Mack's oldest hands, and, when she felt like work, one of their best saleswomen.

"I done it! An' bring them in here, and next time don't set around down there doin' cross-word puzzles while you think it over, Maggie!" she said, rising at once to the girl's aid.

Smith, only half convinced by all this cheerful glibness, fired a parting shot.

"Looks like you've got thirty or forty of them pans here now, Mrs. Cullen."

"Well, here's the way of it, Mr. Smith. There was a school-teacher in this mornin'," Kate responded with deadly readiness, "an' all was that she says her class in domestic signs—whatever they are!—wud need a hunder' of them——"

"My God!" Eugene Smith said under his breath, departing. It was never any use to go against Kate Cullen; he had never really scored against Maggie Johnson, either. The two of them together—!

Joe meanwhile stacked brushes under the counter, while Maggie, arranging the frying pans compactly alongside, exchanged the time of day with Mrs. Cullen.

"Pop's takin' that stuff that never had no label on the bottle; the stuff Ma got at an auction," said Maggie, in answer to the older woman's kindly inquiry. "We tell him maybe it ain't medicine at all, an' that it's piano polish or hair tonic he's takin'. But he says it makes him feel good.—They wear real well, you'd be surprised!" added Maggie, of the ten-cent window weights, to an inquiring customer.

"If they wear at all, you bet your life I'll be surprised," the customer, disenchanted, responded sourly.

Maggie, whose small face up to this moment had worn, Joe noted, merely the indifferently courteous expression of the informative saleswoman, was fired into sudden interest. Her eyes danced with a blue battle spark, she slid the last frying pan into place with a rattle, straightened up, and countered with rapier-like speed.

"We don't guarantee them for use as

weights in private stills, madam, nor to fire at the old man in case of a fam'ly difference!" she explained, to the unconcealed pleasure of everyone within hearing, with the exception of the first speaker.

"Get out of here, Maggie," Kate Cullen said, in a scandalized aside, assisting the suggestion with a shove of her big knee against the small body. "An' you move along, too, Joe," said the saleswoman to the new hand, who was openly enjoying the scene. "The girls are very fresh nowadays," Kate added placatingly to the panting customer. "She'll get fired for that to-night!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear it," the woman said, mollified. "Let her hunt for another job and she'll not be so fresh!"

Joe experienced a perfectly unexpected impulse to defend her.

"What'd she do?" he began to demand blankly. But Kate Cullen's significant wink silenced him. Kate was an expert at handling fussy customers, and if an innocent delusion or two pleased them, she was not the woman to refuse.

The boy went away, presently finding Mag-

gie again in the fevered congestion of the teeming aisles. Her small figure in the big apron seemed to be everywhere, her hair was plastered snugly to her head, her face—and it was a lovely little face—grimy, and pale with fatigue under the grime.

He gathered she was not a saleswoman—she was technically known as a "feeder," one of the several little drudges who flew back and forth with messages, carried notes, ran for fresh supplies of thread and combs and soap and toys and sheet music and bottles of ammonia and perfume and cod-liver oil and beads. Maggie was everybody's slave; Joe, busy in her neighbourhood several times that afternoon, heard her breathless apology for being unable to do two things at the same time.

"I'm sorry, Alma. Mr. Smith sent me down to get some shoppin' bags—them paper ones. I never heard you yell for me!"

Small wonder, Joe thought. Everyone was yelling for her. Above the din and racket, rising into the hot, dusty air, her name was like the burden of a heavily beating, throbbing chorus.

"Maggie!—Maggie!—get Mr. Smith to sign this, tell him the lady's in a rush—it's an even exchange. Maggie! See if you can find them rubber puppies and lions—bring up a whole lot. Where's Maggie? She was goin' to— Maggie, there you are! Take this lady an' introduce her to Mr. Flemin', an' tell him she says—somethin' or other—was wrong with some radio stuff she bought.—Maggie! Can you crawl under there, dear, you're small, an' see can you find the lady's earring that she dropped? Would you send Maggie, Mr. Smith? Will anyone who sees Maggie . . ."

She got more tired, more pale, more miserably draggled-looking as the endless afternoon wore down to winter dusk, and the lights flamed up everywhere. But she never stopped. Joe, who was kept moving pretty briskly himself, encountered the mud-coloured little figure everywhere, running down the dirty brick steps, between the dirty brick walls, to the basement, staggering up again with her arms full of baskets, or socks, or dishpans, as the case might be. The Mack Merrill Chain Stores sold articles at five, ten, and fifteen

cents only. Joe wondered why every woman in the entire city felt impelled to spend those particular sums on this particular day.

Ten-cent pillow covers, hats and straw slippers were to-day's Saturday specials. But there were also sales in the candy, radio, grocery, lamp shade, and Christmas-tree ornament departments. Women fought and struggled at the counters; merchandise was trampled and mussed, dragged on the floor, mixed with the curls of white paper from bolts of ribbon and the rising tide of papers and rubbish and string and mud from wet rubbers that was gathering underfoot. The air grew hotter and hotter, the saleswomen more and more jaded and nervous and uncertain.

Outside the store, the black darkness, at six o'clock, was shot with bright silver slivers of rain. Through the misty air street lights bloomed big and dim, like strange, phosphorescent flowers. And inside, the wild revel went on, the flashing and jerking of ribbons, the little shovels plunging in and out of the jelly beans and lemon drops, the cash registers tinging and tinging, paper rustling, string snap-

ping, patient voices explaining, explaining, explaining over and over again.

Joe saw Maggie up in one of the little pulpits, wrapping and tying packages as if her life depended on it; he saw her under more than one counter, grovelling down among the papers and dirt and string and empty boxes, hunting, straightening; he saw her run the length of every aisle, run upstairs, run downstairs, mount a short ladder and reach for the picnic plates that cascaded in a river upon her head. Once he saw her at the soda fountain, furiously wiping glasses, and finally it was his duty to help her into the show window, to step gingerly between the handkerchiefs and little bottles of cologne, and fish out a certain special Christmas wreath, exactly like a thousand in the store, but desired by a customer who felt that nothing else would do.

How the Mack Merrill Chain Stores could afford to have a figure as sodden, small and forlorn as Maggie Johnson connected with them in any way, Joe, for his part, could not see. But nobody seemed actually to observe her; she was merely a pair of willing feet, a pair of tireless hands. She was baskets or frying pans or sheet music or wall paper, when these were urgently in demand, and when the need was supplied, she was instantly forgotten.

Only once did she speak to Joe that afternoon, and then it was merely to say: "Don't be such a dumbbell, you poor dumbbell!" But Joe knew she was conscious of him when she was in his neighbourhood, was even trying to advise and help his inexperience in her queer little motherly way, and he was not surprised when, as the gong struck six, she appeared beside him at the top of the basement steps, and said:

"That's dinner. We have forty minutes. Did you bring anything?"

He looked at her blankly. He was aching all over, dirty, tired, confused. He shook his head.

"Dinner, I mean," Maggie explained patiently, kindly. "We stay open until ten Saturdays, in December," she reminded him.

"Oh, my-goodness," Joe said simply.

"Lissen," said Maggie, taking in his situa-

tion at a glance. "Go over to the fountain an' get a bottle of milk—it won't cost you nothin'—we can have all we want Saturday nights, becuz it sours, do you see? Then come down where I was this noon."

She disappeared. Joe found her in the basement a few minutes later, when he went down carrying his own bottle of ice-cold, beaded milk, into whose deftly opened top the sodafountain girl had stuck two straws.

"We ain't supposed to come down here," said Maggie, mounting a large barrel and leading the way across crates and stacked wooden boxes in the gloom. "But come in through here, an' I'll show you what I found out the other day."

CHAPTER IV

OE moved cautiously after her; presently she extended a small, hard cold paw for his guidance. The basement was lighted by one dangling electric bulb, but they shortly moved out of its zone, and were led, instead, by the opaque gloomy twilight of a large window that was concealed in a dark corner on a shaft.

This window, as he slid down off a bale of some rolled stuff into its immediate neighbourhood, Joe discovered to be opened. Maggie went through it like a rabbit, and he followed, into a small, cemented place, down at the foot of some twenty stories of rising shaft, laced, after the first floor, by the open balconies of fire escapes.

Opposite them there was another window, also open, and into this Maggie scrambled, without so much as a backward glance or word for him. Joe, after a surprised and cautious look all about, followed her. Distant, dull

noises, humming, roaring, murmuring, came through the walls and down the shaft, to be sure, but there was no nearer witness—he and Maggie were apparently unobserved and forgotten.

She had preceded him to a sort of room built by the walls of piled mattresses, scores and hundreds of mattresses, mounting in stacks up almost to the roof of this neighbouring basement. The strange, brownish dusk, filtering through the high frosted window, like the light under stagnant water, was the only illumination here, and by it Joe saw that the girl had seated herself comfortably, luxuriously indeed, with her small back propped against a bank of mattresses, her small legs stretched out before her on a floor of them, ten deep, and the bottle of milk and cardboard box of supper she had been carrying arranged conveniently to hand.

"Isn't this grand?" she asked, with a long

sigh of satisfaction.

Three walls were made of mattresses, rising high about them. The fourth was that space of brick punctured by the high area window, plushy with dirt outside, and pock-

marked with rain. Joe, fitting his own weary form to its share of mattress floor and mattress backing, grinned an appreciative agreement.

"This is the basement of the Diggins Deepsweet Mattress Company; it backs on to the Mack," Maggie explained, with her own peculiar air of rushing and jumbling her words, in her eagerness to get them said. "We're on Eighth, they're on Ninth-this is one of their storerooms. I found it last summer one night when I wanted to die, I was so sunk, an' I crawled in here an' went to sleep, an' my folks didn't know was I kilt for two days! An' when I woke up, it was about three o'clock in an afternoon," she explained, grinning her own wicked little grin, "an' I slid back into Mack's an' got a load of them Ninon Donclo boodoyer pillers, an' went upstairs with them, an' I told Smith I'd been sick—an' I'll bet I looked sick, too!—an' that was all of that. There's sandwiches in that box; she'll often give you old ten-cent sandwiches for two cents apiece; lots of the girls buy 'em, Saturdays," she said, leaning back wearily, relaxing her hands and closing her purple-ringed eyes, "but I'm too tired to eat, If I should drop off, for God's sake wake me up! I mean it, I'm not swearin', Joe," she said sleepily. "She give me eleven sandwiches for a dime—maybe they was made as far back as Tuesday, but who cares? And there's a lot of broken biscuits there that was in the bottom of a bucket. Stale bread is better for you, anyway. We oughter have a green vegetable, but you can't balance your diet on Saturdays——"

Her drowsy voice stopped. Joe looked at

her in amazement.

"How do you mean, balance your diet?" he asked.

The thick, dusky lashes were raised; he saw her eyes glint in the gloom.

"Don't you know about diet?" she demanded.

"Well, something," Joe admitted with his mouth full. "But I didn't know that you did."

"Oh, sure I do! I read it in a paper," she said, beginning on her own milk, and talking through, or around, the straws. "You have to eat iron and starch and—and fosters," she said, somewhat uncertain of the last word.

He managed a straight face, his voice was grave.

"What was that last?"

"You know, you don't eat iron, like nails an' screws—I ast the doctor at the hospital where my mother was about that," Maggie was saying, in her informative rush, "an' of course you couldn't eat starch straight. But you eat the things that has them in it."

"Iron and starch and—what?" he persisted, fishing for the extraordinary word. But she

would not be baited.

"All sorts of things," she said evasively. "These sandwiches are tuna fish and egg—they're always the ones that are left. We never get the chicken or ham ones, but we don't care, do we?" she ended a little anxiously.

"I don't!" Joe said, ravenous.

She had finished her own milk now, and appeared refreshed. But there was something notably restrained, something almost formal about the way she offered him the food on the cover of a cardboard box, before helping herself, and kept the conversation going with a little effort, a little manner, that he could not understand.

"How'd you happen to find this place?" he asked, approving of it.

She glowed, in the dim gloom that lighted their quiet little eyrie in the mattress walls. The flash of her blue eyes as she turned toward him was like the sapphire glint of a star on a cold night.

"I was after some ideels in our basement," she said. "An' I seen this winder. Ain't it nice in here?"

"You were after some what?" he interrupted, with his mouth full.

"Some ideels. Some of them little—well, sorter prayers they have all coloured up, on cards," Maggie explained. "Like 'No man is useless while he has a friend,' an' 'To earn a little, to spend a little less,' an' 'There's so much good in the worst of us,' " she went on. But at such lightning speed that Joe could not make a beginning or an end to what she said. He burst out laughing.

"You laugh like you were much older than you are," said Maggie, struck with some sudden suspicion. And she peered at him in the half light.

"I'm almost twenty," Joe said. "Why—" he exclaimed, as she sank back against the mattress behind her in amazement, "how old did you think I was?"

"I thought you was a kid," Maggie said frankly. "I kept thinkin', 'Poor kid, it's his first job!' That's," she ended innocently, "that's why I sorter took an interest in you."

"How old are you?" Joe countered. "Fourteen," he said in his mind. "Are you thirteen?" he asked, to please her. Kids liked to say that they were older than one supposed.

"Thirteen!" she echoed, affronted. "I've been workin' four years. I'll be eighteen my next birthday. I was seventeen last Valentine's Day!"

And suddenly both were embarrassed, and they stopped talking, in some confusion of spirit. Joe was surprised to find himself hidden away in this little retreat with a girl who, however small and childish she appeared, was almost a woman, and Maggie was obviously taken aback to discover that all day long, she had been patronizing and pitying a man of nineteen.

"But when I first went to work," Maggie

resumed, after a pause, during which the milk bottles had been emptied and the sandwiches finished, "I was awful little. I opened a door an' checked umbrellas. You'd wonder they let me in at all. Three dollars a week, they paid me."

"Pretty tough!" Joe commented sympathetically, as she stopped, a wistful note in the

delicious young voice.

"Oh, I've had my share!" she responded, in the old-country phrase, quite simply. "We ought to have something green with this," said Maggie again, extending toward him a fresh supply of the broken biscuits.

"Where'd you get all this diet stuff?" Joe

asked, diverted.

"Oh," she flashed carelessly, "the evenin' papers has it, always, a health column."

"But you don't believe all you see in the

papers!" Joe teased.

"I do some things," Maggie countered uncertainly, after a moment's thought. "Diet, and brushin' your hair, an' takin' care of your teeth. An' the hundred best books—I've only read a few. But I've got the list. I read *Ivanhoe* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. I do the cross-

word puzzles, too. An' there're puddings, Thanksgiving suggestions, what your baby said, Nathan's Nut Crackers, patterns—"

"My g-odness!" Joe interrupted the

flood. "What paper do you take?"

"Oh, I take them all, I don't care!" Maggie answered carelessly. "Even the ones in Eyetalian—there's ladies in the house next door reads them."

"You take all the papers!" the boy repeated, amazed.

She was puzzled herself by his tone. Then the light broke.

"I mean I take them out of the store, or the street car when men drop them on the seats!" she explained, bursting into laughter. "I don't pay for them. You couldn't," Maggie went on, sobering, "you couldn't buy many papers on my pay."

"And do you do all the things the papers say to do?" Joe asked, after an interval, when she rested, with arms linked behind her head,

and closed eyes.

"I'm doin' one now," she answered, moving only her lips. "I'm relaxin'. Relax ten minutes after meals, if you're thin. Stand if you're fat. Exercises every mornin'——" She opened her eyes. "Lissen for that gong," she warned him. "An' remind me to take some of them ideels upstairs when we go."

"We have twelve minutes," Joe said, glancing at his wrist. "And do you believe all the

ideal cards, too?" he pursued.

She opened her eyes, interested. "How do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, don't they all have rules for life on them?" Joe suggested. "'Lest we forget,' and 'I am the captain of my soul,' and all that?"

"Was you readin' them to-day?' she asked, surprised.

"No. But I know that kind of stuff!"

"'Let us then be up an' doin',' " Maggie was murmuring, as if she heard the words for the first time. "'Laugh, an' the world laughs with you.' Sure!" she said aloud, in pleased astonishment, "they're kinder rules, too, I guess. I never thought of them that way. They ain't," she said, again in an undertone, as if she were speaking to herself, "they ain't like rules for takin' spots out of things, of course, and whether you ought to stay out nights with

the same boy all the time. But I guess they're rules all right!' And to him she recited animatedly, "'Fourscore an' seven years ago our fathers—'There's no rule in that!" Maggie broke off, frowning. "That's Lincoln's address at Gettysburg." She mused. "But 'Pretty good world!" she broke in excitedly, "that's a rule!"

"I don't know 'Pretty good world,' " Joe said.

She rattled it off.

"Pretty good world with its love an' its light; pretty good world with its dark an' its bright, say it like that an' you'll find it come right, pretty good world, good people!""

"Oh, gosh, it makes me sick at my stomach!"
Joe said faintly, between a laugh and a groan,
sprawling out on his own particular mattress,

with his face in his hands.

Maggie laughed, puzzled but sympathetic. "It sorter doesn't mean anything," she conceded. "But the 'Si sezzes' are funny," she submitted doubtfully.

"The whats?"

"The 'Si sezzes'—we call them that," she elucidated. "They all begin, 'Si sez.'"

"Bunk!" Joe commented disgustedly. "As if it wasn't enough for them to be buying tassels and pillow covers and fifteen-cent stockings and ten-cent lunches, they have to eat up thousands of these tabloid courses in moronism——"

She was staring at him, amazed, and suddenly he stopped short and lapsed into the sulky, dirty errand boy again. But Maggie was faintly suspicious.

"Joe," she began after a moment, "is this

your first job?"

"What makes you think it isn't?" he parried.

"Becuz—becuz fellers of nineteen don't usually begin on what you're doin', stockroom work," said Maggie, "'specially when they talk like you do," she added.

"I worked on a farm awhile," Joe said, thinking of his grandmother's acres. "And I travelled with a circus and worked in a bicycle

shop," he added imaginatively.

Maggie was satisfied. She reverted to a

more interesting topic.

"My mother says that all that newspaper stuff about budgets and systems and all that is the bunk," she offered. Looking at her, he saw that she was some-

what anxiously awaiting his answer.

"My sister has to keep her hands white becuz she demonstrates a beauty cream, and my mother don't get round much," Maggie further volunteered. "But my mother don't like Liz to use make-up—and she won't let me cut my hair—she says it ain't ladylike for girls to bob their hair."

"Father living?" Joe asked.

She hesitated.

"My father's a—a wonderful man. Yes, he's living."

"What's his profess—what's he do?" Joe asked.

"He—he's a travellin' man." Somehow she wanted Joe to admire Pop. "And my mother's —fleshy," said Maggie delicately. "So she can't do dishes and things, and so we never get things caught up—generally. Mamma goes to a good many funerals—I guess——"

"Funerals!"

"Well, yes. They sorter quiet her nerves, she says."

"I see. Well, I'll tell you one thing," said Joe, as they began to gather up the signs of their feast and prepare to return upstairs to the store, "I'll tell you one thing—I wouldn't like your sister."

"Oh, Joe, why not!"

"I don't know. I just know that. And here's another thing, that budget and system and efficiency talk is all true."

Maggie's beautiful blue eyes widened almost as if in pain.

"Oh, Joe, I don't believe it!" she said again. He was cross. It made him cross to think that beautiful little girls had to live lives as hard as Maggie Johnson's, and wear horrible old ticking aprons, and get so pale and jaded and tumbled as the days wore by in the heat and hurry of the Mack. And, perversely, he was glad to hurt her loyalty to this disgusting family: a lazy sister who wouldn't work, a travelling father, and a fat, good-for-nothing mother.

"All right, don't believe it. But what do you think the newspapers print it for?"

"You mean so much for groceries and amusements and clothes and dentists?" she demanded, arresting him with a small clutching hand on his arm.

"Certainly!"

She seemed to droop.

"My mother'd never do it, though! She hates managing."

"Well, because your mother wouldn't do it, Maggie," he said unpleasantly, "doesn't make it less true, does it?"

"No," she said sadly, briefly. And Joe sud-

denly felt ashamed of himself.

He gave her a steadying hand as they scrambled back through the two windows, and over the bales and boxes in their own basement, just in time to hear the gong emit its sharp double ring. But once again in the roar and rush of the store upstairs, he noted that she did not quite restore him to the familiar footing upon which he had been before. There was none of the mothering, indulgently superior attitude now. He was nineteen; let him shift for himself, her shabby little weary shoulders seemed to say, when they wedged by him in the changing, yet never changing, throng.

At ten o'clock women were as furiously, urgently buying tinsel ribbon and wash rags and whisk brooms and beaded chains as if their next opportunity for household purchases were months ahead. But over the less popular counters, the embroidery and hardware and china counters, jaded girls were stretching lengths of cheap silesia, and Murphy, the stout old ruddy janitor, had half closed the iron sliding gates at the three street doors, as a delicate hint.

Two old women, armed with pails and mops, made their appearance far at the back of the store, and purchasers began to take on a slightly apologetic note. "I'm sorry to trouble you—it's too bad to ask you to get those out again—I live across the bay or I——"

Then, suddenly, a gong struck, and a hundred saleswomen were jamming through the black back passage, past the enormous service elevator into the wet street, still shot with needles of crystal. Joe, stooping toward a heap of rubbish that was advancing steadily ahead of a charwoman's wide broom, picked something up and cut through the crowd to follow the sodden little coated figure that was Maggie Johnson.

"Here," he said, handing her a bent card.

"I just found this. It was thrown out. Since you believe everything the newspapers tell you, how's this?"

She smiled at him, her weary, radiant, heartbreaking smile. A smile that had in it all the hope, the disillusion, the weariness and sweetness of her hard seventeen years. She was so small, so wet and forlorn, looking up under a collapsed lump of hat, or cap, or whatever it was, in the light of the lamp-post, that again, and most unexpectedly, Joe felt ashamed of himself. She had taken avid hold of the card he extended; her blue eyes shone in lashes as innocently upcurled as a baby's.

"'The way to begin livin' the ideel life is—to begin,' "she read slowly. And she looked up blankly. "Begin what?" she asked. "That's

all there is. It don't finish it."

Joe hesitated, wishing he hadn't made fun of anything so trusting and simple.

"It's all bunk," he said, trying to laugh.

"Well, I don't know, Joe!" she answered, with a flash of animation crossing her pale, dirty little face. "What you said to-night made me kinder wonder. I've been doing all these things about eatin', and exercise, and washin',"

she said eagerly, "but I guess this thinkin' is just as important. Maybe," she said, "that's why things have all sorter gone wrong with me. I've not thought about 'em much." And in an undertone she added: "I've just done 'em!"

"Ah, no, I was just fooling!" he said, making a gesture to regain and destroy the card. But she protected it.

"I've been handlin' them ideels, and crawlin' over them, and hearin' about them for three years," she said, her face radiant with the joy of a great discovery, "an' to-day's the first time I ever really looked at one! I guess you're tired, Joe," she added, concernedly, as they walked toward the corner together. "Next week won't be so hard. An' I guess it felt pretty good to get that pay envelope to-day, didn't it?" she asked encouragingly.

"Sure, it did," Joe answered briefly.

"Do you go up?" the girl asked. "I live on Goat Hill over there—my father waits for me at the corner, Saturday nights!"

"I live down the island," Joe said.

Immediately, with no farewell, she disap-

peared into the black night like a chipmunk into a burrow. Her sodden hat, and the rough little coat that might, long ago, have been made of cloth intended to imitate chinchilla, but that was now brown and fuzzy and thick and resembled nothing in the world, were swallowed up among other shabby, hometurning shoulders. But Joe, in his last glimpse of her, saw that she held the "ideel" he had rescued from the rubbish heap, in her grimy, small, red hand.

"The ideal life—oh, my God!" he said, thinking of the hard job she had left, of the sort of home to which she was probably going, of the dirty, odorous street, the dirty, clumsy clothes, the grime and need and ugliness of her obscure little path, a gutter rat slipping furtively about the city. She had amused him, diverted him for a moment, but now his face grew dark and bitter again. "You've got a fine chance to lead the ideal life, Maggie Johnson!" Joe said with a bitter laugh.

He turned abruptly and walked a deserted block westward, glancing behind him to be sure he had escaped the home-going tide from the Mack. And in the second block, he stopped short at a handsome roadster, parked before a row of unpretentious homes.

Joe got into it, fished a key from his pocket, and swept from the street. The engine purred, the big car moved smoothly away from the city, passed the parks and the factory district and the scattered lights of the humbler suburbs, and so came to the splendid trees and the great walls and gates of Elmingdale, home of the richest and most fashionable men and women of that particular part of the world.

CHAPTER V

N between certain magnificent posts of stone and brick went Joe and his car, and to the side door of one of the most imposing of all the mansions there. The great windows were pouring angles of subdued light into the dark, wintry garden; an elderly butler, admitting without question the dirty and weary stock boy of the Mack, ventured so far as to lay an eager, welcoming hand on his arm.

"Mr. Joseph—sir! I'm glad to see you back safely, sir. What with—" he coughed delicately—"what with the little unpleasantness yesterday morning, sir, and your—your very emphatic remarks to me, sir, on the subject of your parents'—ahem!—attitude, and then your not returning last night or to-day, either for luncheon or dinner—"

They were mounting together in the little elevator. Over the boy's face a grin of mischief had spread.

"I'm all right, Allen, and you were a brick to be on the job to let me in. I was afraid it might be one of the maids—and they talk too much! I'm late because I got a job."

"In your uncle's firm, sir?" They were in the boy's own handsome rooms now, and could speak naturally, while Joe ripped off his working garments, and the man unobtrusively laid out fresh clothing and pushed back the glass doors of the shower.

"In my uncle's firm!" The handsome, sullen face grew dark again. "I'll say it wasn't in my uncle's firm. Nope, they turned me down as cold as my father and mother did, pretty nearly told me the same thing—that I was a rotten liar and a thief. Nope, I've got a job in the underworld, Allen, and we work Saturday nights, Christmas month."

The butler's face, as concerned and affectionate as a father's, was only slightly brightened.

"You mean you really are working, Mr. Joe?"

"I mean I really am."

"You're not going back to college, sir?"

"Not on your life!"

"Why, but look here, sir," pleaded the older man, distressed, "your father never meant a word he said yesterday morning, nor your mother, either. I've known 'em since before you was born, Mr. Joe, and it's just that they're proud of you—and scared for fear that you'll really get into too deep trouble at college—"

"Allen," Joe interrupted, slipping his arms into the dressing gown the man held ready be-

hind him, "can you keep a secret?"

The butler looked doubtful. He had been keeping the secrets of this family for twenty-five years and more. But he did not for that reason the more enjoy them.

"Anything you told me in confidence,

sir—" he began reluctantly.

"Well, then listen, you keep your mouth shut. I've got a job in the Mack Merrill Department Stores—the Eighth Street one. I'll be as dirty as this and as tired as this every evening from now until after Christmas, and they—my mother and father—are not to get on to what I'm doing, see?—and you've got to stand by."

"A job in the Mack Merrill Stores, sir?" The butler was actually pale. "In the office, sir?"

"In the office nothing! In the shop. Carting wall papers and ink and cleaning brushes and earrings around the place. You know, Allen," Joe added conversationally, testing the shower with an extended hand, "I'm going to show my father that he can't stand me up in a corner and throw mud at me! He can't call me a thief and a liar—"

"Mr. Joseph, sir, he never called you that— I didn't hear that," the horrified old butler interrupted, with an upraised hand.

"Hear him! Everybody in the neighbourhood heard him! No, sir, he doesn't get away with it," said Joe. "Now, you run along, Allen, and keep mum, and tell 'em I'm all right and I'm home!"

The message was duly filtered through the beautiful quiet rooms, penetrated down to the very kitchen, where the maids discussed it in eager undertones. It was unobtrusively carried to a handsome middle-aged man, who was playing bridge with three other men in the

library. It penetrated into a luxurious dressing room, where a beautiful and aristocratic woman was making up her face between a dinner dance and a late ball.

This woman merely raised her eyebrows at the news. Mr. Joseph was at home, was he? Had he said anything of going to Mrs. Russell's party?

No; the maid who delivered the message didn't think he had. The woman began a sentence, hesitated, and finally said that he was please to be told that his mother would come up and see him in five minutes.

And in little more than four times that she did indeed mount the flight of wide, palm-decorated stairs that lay between her suite and his, and appeared, expectantly, in his doorway.

The stockroom boy of the Mack had had a bath, had shaved, and was now dressed in a rich garment belted with a tasselled cord, and was sipping coffee and enjoying a chicken sandwich. His face, as he looked quickly up, assumed an instant expression of scorn, of defiance, and there was a droop, slightly sug-

gesting dissipation, entirely stubborn, to his handsome mouth.

"You came back, did you?" the woman said, sitting down.

He shrugged, half smiled.

"Well, you show your common sense!" the mother said decidedly. "You gain nothing by angering your father."

Joe was silent; again he shrugged faintly.

"Apart from all that disgraceful shouting and quarrelling yesterday morning," the woman began. Joe interrupted her.

"How do you mean 'apart'?"

"Well, I mean—I mean that here you are," his mother said, faintly impatient. "Here you are—and I'm sure that your father has all but forgotten it, is quite willing to forget it, anyway, and now I hope you'll go back on Monday, and just remember to be a little less wasteful where money is concerned."

"I thought you heard Dad tell me that I couldn't go back, and that I was a liar and a thief and all the rest of it!"

"He didn't mean that. Of course you'll have to go back, Joe," the woman said uneasily.

"Why, it would be simply terrible not to have you finish college! All your friends—everybody——"

"He told me to get a job, remember?"

"I know. But you know how recklessly your father talks."

"He can't talk to me like that," Joe said haughtily, as his mother paused. "Maybe he can to his employees, but he can't to me! You can tell him I've got a job."

"You haven't!"

"Well, I say I have."

"Doing what?"

"Never you mind what. I've got a job, and I'm going to keep it. I'm not going back to college. He's not going to call me a thief and a liar again. He told me to get a job, and I got one, and that's all."

"What-with Uncle Tom?"

"With Uncle Nobody! It's a sort of—of underworld investigation. I got it on my own hook."

"Well, but that's nonsense," the woman said after a pause, somewhat at a loss. "Your father won't permit you for one instant to give up college and work! He——"

"My father told me he wasn't going to back me financially any more," Joe interrupted hotly. "He said if I was a man at all I'd get to work, and stop wasting time and money. Well, I've done it, that's all. And you can tell him so! Maybe, while we're on the subject of liars and thieves, the old man himself will get called, some day. He's ready enough to call other people names! Meanwhile, I'm done with college and I'm working, and he can make what he likes of it!"

"Why, he'll not endure it one instant!" the woman said, the more warmly because she was secretly afraid that he might. "Nineteen years old, and stopping college, and going to work! It's ridiculous, and it can't go on! Meanwhile, aren't you going to the Russells'? It's Millicent's coming-out party—she'll certainly expect you!"

"Lillian," the boy said lazily, "I'm sunk. I didn't know how tired I was until I got clean, and comfortable, and into this chair. I think I'll let Millicent cry herself to sleep, tonight. The underworld has sapped my energies—what with cologne and postcards and tinsel and vegetable knives."

"What are you talking about!"

"Nothing. Nothing. But I'm a workingman now, no time for frivolities. Leave me be, Mother. I'm dead."

There was a silence. The woman sat puz-

zled and disapproving, thinking.

"Listen, Joe. You do like Millicent, don't you? She's such a dear little thing," his mother presently began sentimentally, "and she likes you so much! Joe, there'll be any amount of money there—and Dad would be so pleased if you'd just——"

"Give her my love and tell her I'm trying to get together enough money for our little nest," said Joe. "I'll see her at the club tomorrow, anyway—she always plays golf Sun-

day mornings."

"I don't understand you, Joe," his mother said in cold disapproval. "You went out of the house yesterday morning wild because your father had said he'd take you out of college if this spending of money went on. Now you say you've got a job and don't want to go!"

She stood, handsome and imperious and dissatisfied, in the doorway, the evening wrap of

soft flexible fur loose on her shoulders, her hair elaborately curled and dressed, jewels sparkling on her bare throat and on her fine hand.

"I'm reformed!" Joe, not changing his position of luxurious comfort in the big chair, said jocosely. "The old man called me names this morning," he added mildly. "Well—my business is what you might call an educational one. It's just possible—it's just possible that some day I'll have the laugh on the old man!"

"I wish you'd stop talking nonsense, and follow me over to the Russells'," his mother said impatiently. "I don't know what they'll

think if you don't come."

"Tell them I've had a change of heart—I've got religion," Joe said indifferently. "Tell them that the way to begin living the ideal life is to begin."

"To begin what?" sharply asked Lillian Spencer Merrill, wife of the owner of the

Mack Merrill Chain Stores.

"Just that, darling. The way to begin living the ideal life is—to begin," said Joseph Grant Mackenzie Merrill mildly.

CHAPTER VI

RS. JOHNSON, born Petheridge, cherished in herself, and planted in her daughters, an unbounded sense of righteous pride. She often lamented, usually in his hearing, her husband's lack of the quality. The Johnsons had no pride, and no particular cause for pride, she said.

But the Petheridges, and their collateral lines of Larkins and Lawrences! These, 'Lizabeth and Maggie firmly believed, were the most distinguished folk alive. They felt sorry for their father, who had none of this blood in his veins. How could he expect to succeed, to rise in his work, to make money, being a mere Johnson?

Ma told them thrilling tales of Gran'ma Larkin's sampler, hung above the Petheridge fireplace in the magnificent Petheridge home "down South," and about the Johnny Yanks sands of them, all singing and dancing and happy, and not any more wanting to be freed than so many irresponsible sparrows!

Pop, meanwhile, miserably represented not only the low-born Johnsons, but the entire ranks of the Johnny Yanks as well. He would cringe while Ma was enlarging upon this topic, and nervously clear his throat. And whenever he spoke of Vermont families, Ma said with her rich, unctuous laugh, "Makin' wooden nutmegs, I suppose?" and the girls had to laugh, too.

Not that Maggie was not loyal to her father; she had no heart in the laughter Ma so often directed against him. But it was simpler all round to laugh. If she looked hurt or shocked or sympathetic, Ma might instantly become angry and begin to quarrel.

"What you pullin' such a long face for?" Ma might sharply inquire. "I'm not going to be allowed to say one word in my own house about the men that stole my money and ruined my life—is that it? You've got to make a scene about somethin' you don't know nothin' about, is that it? Well, let me tell you one thing right now . . ."

The one thing would lead to others that Ma felt obliged to mention, and the family harmony, such as it was, be entirely disrupted before Ma had expressed herself to her own satisfaction. So Maggie came to laugh at Ma, as 'Lizabeth did, and as, indeed, poor browbeaten Pa did. No use going against that particular current, there were too many others to struggle with, if one were to struggle at all! It didn't matter, anyway, what Ma said. Her bark was worse than her bite.

And often, when Maggie and her father were alone, he would give her a fairer idea of the case, and they would salve for each other, in secret, the wounds Ma so casually dealt forth.

"You see, dearie," Len would explain in his mild, uncomplaining voice, "Ma's just quotin' things she heard when she was a little girl. She never saw your great-grandmother's house, with those samplers and things—she's just talked about 'em so much she kinder thinks she has! Her father come out here from Missouri when she was about eight; I guess he didn't amount to much—I guess none of 'em didn't amount to much. Your grand-

mother Petheridge married a seafaring man when your mother was about grown-up, and she took a job in a hotel here. That's where I met her. She had a brother Willie—he was a real handsome, smart feller, but we lost sight of him years ago. But the Civil War was sixty-five years ago," the man would add. "Your mother can't remember nothing about slaves and all that. I don't know as her folks ever had slaves, anyway. They lived right in East St. Louis, and they had a drug store—I don't know just what they would have done with slaves!"

Sometimes, warmed by the dancing eyes of his appreciative listener, Pa would ramble on to the other side of the ancestral picture, to his own boyhood on a Vermont farm.

"I surely would like you to see the place, some day, Maggie. There was eight of us boys, and my sister Margaret,—you're named for her, and for my mother, too. There's some of them there still, I daresay—I haven't heard for twenty years. You'd like your grandmother's kitchen—winter or summer, that was the place us boys liked to be! I remember when a big storm would be comin' up—trees bendin'

over, and planks rattlin' in the yard, and the old well-sweep creakin'-how we loved the kitchen then! There was a big open fireplace one side, but she had her range built right across it, and there wasn't never a drop of anythin' spilled on that range—she kep' it like black glass. The snow would begin to spin down-blue as ocean water, outside, and she'd light lamps, and she'd set us all to work, peelin' things, or mendin' her pots and pans. And maybe Margaret would read 'The Lady of the Lake' or somethin', and Ma'd sweep up the floor—there wasn't ever a speck on it. anyway—and she'd get out cookies and apples and big glasses of milk—she'd always say we had to 'stay our stomachs' before we went out to bed down the stock. And mind you, Maggie, the barn was built right along the road, connected with the farmhouse—first the dairy come, and then the storehouse, and then my father's toolhouse."

"Oh, Pop! But why did you ever come away?"

"I d'no, Maggie. Jest got restless, I guess." Lately, listening entranced to this always welcome story, the small audience of one had yoiced a new question.

"Look here, Pop. If my grandmother Johnson had nine children and no servants, how could she manage to keep the place so clean, and the stove shining so, and everything? Ma says that no lady ought ever to do her own work, and she says it can't be done!"

"Well, maybe your grandmother Johnson wasn't a lady, Maggie."

Maggie would savour this meditatively. And then, with keen anxiety, and blue eyes fixed on his, she would ask:

"Pop, do you think there's any hope I'm not a lady? Not like my grandmother Petheridge, I mean? Because," Maggie would rush on eagerly, "I'd love to have my kitchen always clean and orderly, and pies cooling on the windowsill, and jam all put up, and me in a nice clean gingham dress——"

"And a real big, stiff white apron!"

"—and a big stiff white apron, sitting down on the side porch, rocking, like you said Gran'ma Johnson always did! And I'd like to believe in all those newspaper budgets, and system, and having a regular hour for everything," Maggie would conclude, expectant eves on his face.

"Well-I don't know, dearie. Your mother hasn't real good health, you know. And your

sister has to keep her hands nice."

"On account of demonstrating the beauty cream!" Maggie would finish the conventional gambit loyally.

"And then, of course, we're poor folks, Maggie. When you have to do without things-"

It was the weak voice of the underling, hammered into the rut of his own limitations. unable to dream the way out.

But Maggie was different.

"Pop, we're not poor! Why, you and Ieven without what 'Liz makes, 'cause, of course, she has to look nice, and she spends most of it on her clothes-"

"Becuz of the kind of customers that come into her place," Len Johnson finished it, loy-

ally again, in his turn.

"Well, but even you and me I me I me I—" Maggie tried the pronouns rapidly, without punctuation, decided upon the latter, and

rushed on—"even you and I make more than two hundred a month, Pa. And there's budgets as low as one hundred!"

"Two hundred a month for four folks ain't much in these days, Maggie, when everything's gone up so high!" It was the automatic protest.

And for weeks it silenced her. But after awhile she countered it somewhat uncertainly.

"But, Pop—those budgets, and the lists the government sends out, and the newspapers and the magazines that's always having articles by 'N. B.' and 'Mrs. G. K.' and 'A California Housewife'—they know how things have gone up, don't they?"

"Dearie, your Pop ain't much on mathematics," Len would say, passing a weary hand over his troubled forehead, shaking his meek, gray little head.

Even so, he was more satisfactory than either 'Lizabeth or Ma. The first took no interest whatsoever in housekeeping economies, system, or budgets. Liz did as little work at home as she could, and much less than she should, slept late, dressed slowly, complained of everything, ate her breakfast, and was off

for the day—and very often for the night, too. She was twenty, and extremely pretty, with her mother's dark rich hair and white skin, and she was always in demand for the dances and diversions of a rather questionable but indisputably gay set.

Ma, approached on the subject of household reform, had much to say and very, very little to do. She would begin by disarming Maggie with the exhausted, weary gentleness

of the martyr.

"She's in the right of it, Pop—you ought to listen to this, an' you too, 'Lizabeth. Maggie, you're right. We'd ought to have a different sorter house, an' a place big enough to swing a cat in for a kitchen, so's we could keep everything spotless. There, now—on that table, we'd ought to have nice white oilcloth, flowers—like Lady Washingtons or nasturtiums—growin' in that window, an' nice little white curtains. That's the way the kitchen oughter look—and that's the way your grandmother Petheridge's kitchen did look. It always looked elegant! We could have one of them kitchen cabinets in here, too—I passed one in a winder the other day, an' I declare if it

didn't look like it would just about half do the work itself!

"But poor folks can't be choosers, Maggie," her mother would remind her kindly, dashing the girl's hopes earthward again. "When I and your pop was married, beef was fifteen cents a pound! I remember that, because I said to the butcher, 'Ain't that a lot?' I wasn't nothin' but an innocent child—I'd never done any work with my own hands before. 'Keep them little hands like flowers!' our old doctor, Dr. Lovejoy, use' to say. He was a Southerner, too—"

"But I thought you had a job in a hotel, Ma!" Maggie, when she was much younger and less experienced, used to interpolate innocently at a point like this. Her mother would colour resentfully and say vaguely and disapprovingly, "That was much later. I don't know what nonsense your father's been talkin' to you!"

Nowadays, Maggie only listened respectfully, feeling that if beef would only go down to fifteen cents a pound again, everything might yet be well. Meanwhile, the kitchen grew shabbier and shabbier, and water and grease and ashes darkened the chipped floor, and the plates were piled in the sink, and the faucets dripped on them unavailingly.

She had found room for the ideal leaflet that Joe had given her on the crowded shelf above the sink, and sometimes she looked up from the dishpan at it, with wondering eyes. "The way to begin living the ideal life is—to begin."

Her mother said that it didn't seem to her to make sense. 'Lizabeth read it once, suspiciously, and then forgot all about it. But Len and Maggie discussed it more than once, in some bewilderment. Len said frankly that he was no hand at poetry, and didn't "get it."

"But 'tisn't poetry, Pop," she assured him

one night.

"Oh, I don't know, dearie. That word 'ideel.' That looks to me like a real poetry word, somehow. And looker the way it sorter breaks off uneven at the end of the lines."

"I don't know just what an ideel life is," Maggie mused, under her breath. "But I'll bet I'd like to begin livin' it!"

There was no hot water, and nobody in the world could wash the plates after a lamb stew

dinner in cold. The platter was edged with little icebergs of fat, even the glasses were greasy to-night. Maggie had to put the kettle on, no use trying to heat the big boiler for these few dishes.

She piled them and scraped them while she waited. Her father was in his shirt-sleeves, smoking a short pipe, and scattering the sheets of an evening newspaper on the dirty floor. His elbow had jerked the red cotton table-cloth awry, and the sugar bowl had tipped over. The gas stove was streaked with dried batter and grease, the very dish towels were sodden and mud-coloured, and fatty to the touch.

"Maggie!" This was her mother, from bed. "Liz go out?"

"Ten minutes ago, Ma."

"I didn't hear her."

A pause, then Maggie said under her breath:

"She didn't mean you should."

"What say, Maggie? I can't hear you, clatterin' pots and pans that way!"

"I didn't say anythin', Ma."

"Well, here's all there is to it," said Mrs.

Johnson. "I'm at the end of my green, and I can't do no more leaves until I get some. I guess you're tired, ain't you?"

"Not so very."

"I ain't tired," Len Johnson said, stirring.
"Oh, Pop, you are too! Don't put on your coat and shoes just for that—I'll run down to the corner and see if Mrs. Ashman has any."

"You'll have to get the money from your

father, Maggie!"

"Pop, have you thirty cents?"

"I guess so." He counted it out—dimes, pennies.

"Will two be enough, Ma?"

"Don't yell at me that way, Maggie—come into my room, if you want to speak to me. I'm doing the embroidery for a chair, and we'll all get the good of the chair, an' I don't like to have you so ungracious—just because I ask you to run half-a-block errand for me! I had green twist down on my list when I went to market to-day, an' then left the list on the kitchen table—I was wild. How much did your father give you? Thirty cents—yes, that'll be enough, but I would like to know

what Len Johnson does with his money! Shut that door!"

Dishes waiting, kettle so slow to heat, crumbs on the floor, batter spilled and dried on the stove, the red tablecloth rumpled, the sugar bowl upset, dish towels stiff with grease and water—no matter, the inspiration of it went before her like a banner, as she ran down the dark street.

"The way to begin living the ideal life is to begin."

CHAPTER VII

"OE," Maggie asked, a day or two later, "how could you live the ideal life if nothin' in your life was ideel?" "Ah, there's the catch!" Joe answered airily. But Maggie did not return his smile.

"There's no catch in our goods," she persisted sturdily. "They wouldn't sell them

things if they wasn't true."

"Who told you that?" Joe said banteringly, diverted by her earnestness. "Grammar, Mag-

gie, grammar," he added, idly.

"Oh, I know it!" she reiterated confidently. "They. wouldn't sell those things," she repeated painstakingly, "if they was—were not true. That's right, ain't it?"

"Well, that's better," said Joe. "You ought

to go to night school, Maggie."

"Merrill will do awful bone-headed things," Maggie pursued serenely, returning to his charge, "but honesty is the foundation of this business." She was quoting again. Joe puzzled, shaking his head, eyed her sidewise. He thought he had never seen a human being so thirstily—so pathetically receptive. Everything she could glean from newspapers, from casual conversation, from the few books for which she had time, she drank in eagerly, and her beautiful, unsatisfied eyes were always searching for more.

"Well, there's no real catch in it," he conceded. "But I don't know how I can explain it to you."

"Joe, who taught you to talk so good?" asked Maggie, enthralled. "I know lots of people who has good parents, and my own aunt were a school-teacher—"

"Oh, Maggie!" he interrupted patiently. "Why do you talk so fast, and so much, and so carelessly? Now, you stop it. You can speak perfectly good English, if you'll just stop and think."

"I know it," she said meekly, carefully.

"The meaning of that ideal life thing," Joe resumed, "is this: You're—you're all in your own mind, do you see? What you have doesn't matter. What you think and what you are is

everything—and what bunk it all is!" he added sneeringly to himself. "Do you get me?" he asked aloud.

She did not get him at all, but she nodded, not moving her eyes from his handsome, goodnatured face.

"You must make everything beautiful in your life," Joe said, encouraged by her attention. "An old plate, for instance, an old stain on the wall. Why, Maggie, the museums of Europe are full of them—old plates and ragged clothes and worn-out rugs and water stains, and everyone thinks they're beautiful!"

"Aw, they do not!" scoffed Maggie, disap-

pointed in him.

"I give you my word they do. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, for instance. Did you ever hear of that?"

"Michelangelo done it," Maggie said, nodding.

"Michelangelo whatted it?" Joe asked sharply.

"He d-d-did it!" Maggie triumphed.

"And how did you know that?"

"Oh, we had it in school, an' then we have 'em here, among the fifteen-cent clas-

sic coloured reproductions," Maggie replied.

"Well. All those old pictures are dirty and worn, mouldering away—all the old palaces are, lots of the books, all the furniture—and yet persons swarm over there every year and admire them," said Joe. "Now, the point is, suppose you had to live with a lot of rotting furniture, and chipped plates, and you just said to yourself: 'These are beautiful and valuable relics—'

"No," Joe interrupted himself. "That isn't quite it, either. Suppose you sort of lifted yourself above everything that was ugly in your life—no, that isn't exactly what I'm after, either—" he broke off again.

She continued to regard him seriously, a half-eaten apple in her hand. There was something about her childish air of dependence and expectancy that inspired him to be idiotic, he thought vexedly.

"You mean that cups an' chairs an' being poor an' tired really have nothin' to do with the way you live?" she asked, coming nearer to it than he had, as he recognized somewhat to his surprise.

"You've got it," he said.

But Maggie did not hear him. He had opened the door, to be sure, but she had fled through it so rapidly that her feet were already far ahead of him. There was vision in her uplifted eyes, as if the walls of the mattress factory, where they were sitting, had faded away, and new dreams of beauty and fitness and purity had risen before her inner sight.

"Joe, nothing could stop that if you once got it!" she said in a whisper. And then, half to herself, "I can't wait to get home and begin!" And after a while she said wistfully: "Joe, I wish I knew as much as you know."

"A lot of it's bluff," he said carelessly. But he liked her blind admiration, nevertheless.

"Does your mother work?" she asked him one day.

"My-?" He started, considered.

"Not now," he said. "She split a Board the other day," he said, after thought.

Maggie saw nothing unnatural in this. She visualized a sturdy, bareheaded old woman helping with the family supply of kindling.

"What does your father do, Joe?"

"The only real work Dad does now is on a

golf course, at a country club," Joe answered scrupulously.

"A gardener?" she asked, widening her

eyes. "A caretaker?"

It was a shame to tease her, but then she was such a simple little dumbbell, Joe reflected. Grimy little face, grimy little hands, mud-coloured apron, and boots a size too big.

"I'll bet the old man doesn't know that there's anyone in the world as hard up as that kid is," Joe thought. "She's pretty—her eyes are, anyway—and I'll bet that hair would be pretty, if it was taken care of." And idly the thought drifted into his head: "I'd like to bring my mother in here some day, and introduce Maggie to her as my future wife. Lord—Lord, what a row! If I could get something on the old man, on the whole darned chain of his darned old stores, and then put Maggie in as a finishing touch—looking just as she looks now, poor kid——"

Maggie was talking.

". . . but she was quite a swell. She didn't have much money, mind ju, but he did. Mackenzie was in the business then, an' they say he named his son for him."

There was a familiar ring about these facts; could she possibly be speaking of her employer and of his father?

"What on earth are you talking about?" he

asked blankly.

"Merrill," she answered readily. "Mackenzie was the brains, they say—he was the 'Mack'—but he's dead. But Merrill is the soul of honour, and he not on'y has the faculty of drawin' good men about him, but he has made a small fortune out of the Mack, took care of most of her fam'ly, an' has kep' sev'ral of her relatives out of jail for what they done profiteering in wartime as well!"

Joe was staring at her, oddly, a slow smile spreading on his face.

"Who taught you that piece?"

"Ev'ryone knows that."

"Is—that—so?" He grinned. Relatives of his mother kept out of jail, eh? That was probably Uncle Irving and young Irv.

"Maggie, where'd you learn punctuation?" She knew he was teasing her, teasing her because he liked her and found her amusing, and her eyes gleamed with joy. "I never did learn it. It's bein' on time, ain't it?"

"It is not. It means speaking—clearly—and slowly—like a gentlewoman."

"Gentlewoman. That's a lady? But that's a prettier name than 'lady,' " Maggie mused aloud.

"It's a prettier thing, too."

He looked at her, musing in his turn. She was the most amusing little rag-bag he had ever seen; she packed more fire, more spirit and excitement and emotion, more rage and more joy, into almost every waking hour of her existence than many a girl he knew—Millicent Russell, for instance—packed into a year.

Millicent was always rushing, jazzing, drinking, smoking, speeding, giggling, and chattering, but she took nothing to heart. Maggie Johnson took everything to heart. She was indifferent, cool, contained about nothing.

"I'd like to walk Maggie in on the old man some day—or better yet, walk him into the store and introduce Maggie as the fine, independent girl he's always talking about," Joe reflected. "I'd say, 'You keep suggesting that I get out somewhere and meet a real girl—well, she's real, Maggie. And she's going to step right off the floor of the Mack into the position of your only daughter-in-law."

"I might bluff it, anyway," his thoughts ran on. "Maggie's such a little sport, she'd enjoy playing the part. She'd make up for it and

carry it off like a comedienne!"

And then, finally, as he smiled at her absently and her eager talk went pouring on about him only partly heard, came the concluding thought. He couldn't play any games with Maggie. The poor kid was falling in

love with him fast enough as it was.

"It's probably her first crush," Joe thought, watching her not without a sort of generous pity. "She'll have it bad. But it won't hurt her, it never hurts anyone. You've got to get through it, that's all. She's so darned motherly—maybe that's what started her off on me. She was sorry for me that first day, and she's gone right on feeling that I sort of belong to her. She doesn't know yet what's happening to her—I hope she never gets on to it."

She was far enough from any appreciation

now, at all events, as she chattered on of everything she found interesting, sometimes making him laugh, sometimes—oddly—giving him a prick behind the eyes that owed itself to a very different sensation. Maggie had never thought of love, for herself. She was strangely half-woman and half-child, her problems were of her mother's health and moods, her father's comfort, her sister's alarming daring and independence.

Her own affairs, indeed, were entirely secondary. What she wore, what she ate and had, were less important than what Ma and Pa and Liz wanted and must have. Other girls' silk stockings and theatre trips and beaus concerned Maggie not at all; she drove past them, furiously, tirelessly, obliviously, intent upon capability at the store and harmony at home, and little else.

But she betrayed herself to Joe with almost every word and glance.

"I'll tell you what, Joe, I like you better than anyone else except my own fam'ly!"

"Don't like me as well as your sister, huh?"
This would pose her. The happy colour would be flaming and fading in her face, the

long lashes shyly dropped, and perhaps her hard little busy hands would be idle, on a dusty crate or a clumsy bundle, while she thought it out.

"Well, I like some things about you as well as I like anythin' about Liz," she might finally decide.

"And Ma—how about her? Do you like anything about me as well as any other quality about Ma?"

A pause of admiration.

"Joe—you said that awful nice!"

"Horrible and terrifying nice, huh?"

"Oh, well, now, lissen!" She would be hotcheeked, wide-eyed in her own defense. "You say awful—all the time! You say things would be awfully nice, or that you're awfully sorry——"

"I know I do! But you—you're the one that wants to speak perfect English."

"Maybe—" she mused one day sadly—"maybe you have to say things right when you're little or else you never can get them right at all!"

The little figure drooped against a length of drab-painted brick wall, the small, hard-worn

hands were clasped in one of her rare moments of idleness, and her absently staring eyes wore an unusual expression of sorrow and doubt. Joe's heart pricked him.

"Not at all! You go the way you're going and you'll be a wonder!" he said encouragingly.

Her suddenly radiant face, the dewy, delighted laughter in her eyes, and the renewed joy and enthusiasm with which she went upon her way made him thoughtful for a moment. It was all very well to reassure Maggie, make her happy, jolly her along, Joe reflected uncomfortably. He liked her, and he liked to please her. But she was such a whole-hearted, headstrong, earnest little kid that one couldn't estimate exactly where her feelings would stop—she might plunge headlong into some affection that would cost her very dear, cost her tears and heartaches that would only make her difficult, obscure, humble little problem harder.

"I hope you're not beginning something that you can't finish, Maggie!" he said to himself more than once. "The girls are teasin' me about you," she told him one day.

"What do you care what the girls do?" Joe asked.

"Oh, I like it!" she said, shyly radiant.

"Now, stop it—stop it this instant," Joe said. "Don't you know that flirting is strictly forbidden in store hours?"

"I wasn't flirtin'!" But her eyes were alight, and her whole little shabby being seemed to shine with the new, heady joy of it. "Honest, I don't know anythin' about flirtin'," she said.

"Ha!" Joe ejaculated. "You could teach any other woman I ever came up against. You're a bold, bad little girl, and I tell you to stop it, and I mean stop it."

"But I can't help showin' I like you, Joe!"

Maggie pleaded shamelessly.

"You don't know anything about it. You're not eighteen yet. Now, you run along with your red Christmas candles, and let me get these ash trays out from under this counter."

One day he brought her a long envelope, which, upon opening it in an expectant flutter, Maggie found full of printed "G's," large and small, cut from magazines and newspapers.

"Oh, Joe, it's awful cute the way you learn me!" she said, her betraying eyes luminous, her whole being melting toward him visibly, irresistibly, even though the hour was midafternoon and the two were in full view in the aisle, between the shelf papers and the nails. And she presently reported that her mother and sister had made dry, half-contemptuous reference to the fact that she did not drop the ubiquitous final consonant any more.

She told him that he had brought her all her luck.

"It was the day you first—" she paused—
"first came," she resumed briskiy, deciding upon her verb, "that I got on to the ideel idea.
'Member you and me talked about the ideels, and I sorter thought of them, for the first time? And then 'member that you gave me one that night, going home? Well, I put it up by the clock, and we—we just about live by that card. It's made a difference in Pa, an' it's made a difference in me, an' in everything."

He thought to himself that he knew her well enough now to know that whatever she did she would do with a passion and completeness amounting to actual violence. There was something intensely pathetic in the fashion with which she seized upon new ideas, like a small wren grasping unwieldy straws, and flew gallantly along, dragging them with her.

"I see a difference in you," he said seriously.

Her bright face grew brighter.

"Oh, Joe, honest-do you?"

"Honest, I do." He adopted her own phrase.

"How?" she demanded excitedly.

"Well, in everything. The way you talk, the way you look, the way you act," he said.

"Oh, I wisht—" she said elatedly—"I wisht you could see the difference in our kitchen! Pop an' me—" She paused. "I an' Pop," she began again uncertainly, "ask each other every night, 'Is it ideel?' And we won't go to bed unless it is!"

"Pop and I," he suggested casually.

"Pop and I, I mean." And she looked at him with all the adoration of her ardent little heart in her face.

It soothed him to have her so openly, so completely adoring. In these days, when he sulked at home, and when a dignified silence reigned between him and his father and mother, these days when his golf clubs and tennis rackets looked as if they belonged to another world, he found Maggie Johnson a valuable asset. She thought him brilliant, she thought him well educated, she thought him wise and witty and lovable, when his own failed him.

And her laughter! The divine, the inimitable gift of mirth had been given her—Joe first thought Maggie pretty when first he saw her laugh. She lived in a delicious gale of it, laughter trailed her forlorn little figure up and down the aisles, the most tired, the least friendly of the saleswomen smiled somehow when she spoke to Maggie. Everything was funny to Maggie; Joe began to think that there was a great deal more comedy than he had suspected in the grime and monotony of the working world.

"What's funny now, for heaven's sake?"

"Lissen, Joe!" The companionable little figure—she was very small—would be jumbled against him confidentially for a moment of little-sister laughter and confidences. "Didn't you see that lady customer makin' such a fuss over the mouse traps? 'Does this

one work?' she ast Mabel Keane. 'Yes'm,' Mabel says, 'the mouse goes in there,' she says. 'Oh,' the customer says, 'like this, huh?' An' she run her finger in, Joe, an' they had to get Kelly to come an' file off the trap!"

And Maggie would go upon her way toward the genuine brass candlesticks, leaving Joe with a grin on his face and a feeling of warmth and pleasantness in his heart. That little soft arresting touch on his coat, that little soft girl-person jumbled against his shoulder for a minute, in the crowded aisle, those blackfringed eyes brimming with mirth and affection—those were all darned agreeable things, his thoughts would agree.

A hundred times, a thousand times, he

heard her call herself lucky.

"I'm lucky—and you've had hard luck!" she said to him, more than once. "I hope I'll stay lucky. I'd feel awful if my luck changed!"

"How do you mean you're lucky?" he asked her, annoyed. Lucky! Poor little low-born slave of a rotten social system, it made him angry even to have her call herself so!

With her usual eager rush she retailed a hundred reasons. Her health, her wonder-

ful family, her mother—described as "genteel," her dashing sister, who had such a good job, and her father—without whose assistance Maggie's yearnings toward the "ideal life" would have been crushed in the bud, and whose companionship meant everything to the washer of the Johnson dishes and the keeper of the Johnson kitchen.

Joe had discovered, by this time, the true nature of her father's humble calling. But Maggie quite innocently had conveyed to his mental vision a picture of a very cavalier among postmen, a tall, masterful man with flashing eyes, striding magnificently about upon his round, awaiting only the opportunity to prove himself capable of greater, indeed, illimitable, achievement.

"But you've had hard luck, Joe," she agreed pityingly. And the tender cadences in her soft, rich little voice sank like the notes of a mourning dove into the stillness of the stockroom where they held these flying conversations.

This vexed him, too. Or perhaps the prickling, uncomfortable emotion it aroused, was not vexation, but something deeper—something nearer compunction. Of course he had had a rotten deal. But for Maggie to be the one to see it!

"How d'ye mean I've had hard luck?"

"Oh, well, every way! You weren't raised for this kind of work—and you hate it, and you keep thinkin' that you'd rather be somewheres else, doin' something else, an' you don't like these girls here in the Mack—Joe, does your mother cook good?"

"Is that a vegetable?"

"What did I say then?" She knew by his tone it had been something incorrect. "Does your mother cook well?" she amended it uncertainly.

"Nope. Doesn't know a darn thing about cooking," Joe confessed. A look intensely distressed came into Maggie's earnest eyes.

"Don't your father help her none any?" Maggie asked, including another correction smoothly, without a change of expression.

"Never. The old man is no more use around the house than a paper monkey!" Joe said.

"Joe, I do think that's pretty hard on you!" the girl said, sympathetic and indignant, "Who makes your bed?"

"Oh, anybody. Last night I had dinner with some friends of ours named Russell," Joe volunteered.

"And did she give you a good dinner?" "Who?"

"Mrs. Russell—that asked you over for dinner."

"Oh, yes—she cooks all right." An odd look came into Joe's eyes. "Her daughter was there," he added.

"Daughter? An' her husband?"

"No. Mill-Milly's not married."

"The daughter ain't?" Maggie's tone struck with a light snap, like a whip.

"Nope."

"Just a little girl, huh?"

"Nope. Milly's about—nineteen." Joe was enjoying himself, watching the quickened colour and shortened breath.

"I guess she's pretty, ain't she?"

"She's beautiful."

But he told himself that he must stop this teasing, when he saw her suddenly daunted face, the gallant efforts she made to appear quite herself. Instantly she ended the little conference, plunged into a crate for pink and

blue garters, and went on her way upstairs balancing a dozen boxes of them.

But he saw that her colour had ebbed and that the little hand that steadied the boxes was itself unsteady.

CHAPTER VIII

his own business filled with a wretched sensation that he must somehow make this up to Maggie. Yet—hang it!—the very making up would carry the matter further, and it had gone far enough. At his first overture toward comfort, his first admission that Milly Russell meant nothing in his life, Maggie, in a burst of relief and happiness, would outdistance all her previous shy evidences of affection and confidence—in short, they would be put almost into the rapturous and idyllic position of lovers after a quarrel, nearer and dearer than before, exactly as if they had really been the shabby, gawky, inexperienced stock boy and the "runner" they appeared to be.

"Unlucky. She's lucky and I'm unlucky," Joe mused, with a bitter little twist to his mouth. "Gosh, what a little fool she is!"

He shook himself physically. He could not

shake the thought away. He unlucky—with the roadster parked a few blocks away, and the comfort of one of the State's most beautiful homes back of the roadster. He unlucky—a Merrill playing at work, here in one of the stores he would largely own some day!

More bewildering still, he was beginning to like this play work. It was real, anyway, and college had never seemed real, to Joe. The made problems, the detached facts, the desiccated odds and ends of history and letters, carefully divided into doses just large enough for the average adolescent brain, the fraternity houses with their pompous, stupid conversations about loyalties and code, voiced by arrogant young parasites who were guided by no code whatsoever, had never satisfied him even for a moment.

But oddly, unexpectedly, there were moments when the Mack filled his soul with a deep content. It was almost as if the son of his father, the only son of blunt, homely, practical Merrill himself, had inherited a taste for this plebeian form of activity. Joe revelled in the rush and hurry, the absurdity and yet seriousness of everything that went

on in the Mack. When an entranced buyer showed him a postcard bearing a raised chenille blue rose, glinted with gold specks, and appealed for his sympathy, Joe won her friendship for life by searching, with infinite trouble, for a companion postal bearing a daisy embellished with loose white velvet leaves. Even Smith and Fleming sometimes took Joe into their counsels, as they wandered importantly to and fro, alert for the dissatisfied eyes of customers, confidential with the trusted clerks, admonitory to the newcomers.

"Where'd be a good place to keep those waste baskets, Joe? They list 'em under household, but the commercial stationery girls say they oughter have 'em."

Or, "Don't waste any time explaining those padlocks to that red-headed girl, Joe. She's going to be dropped, Saturday. She ain't our kind."

Joe's championship of Maggie helped her from the very beginning—an obvious fact that made her still more his abject slave. On the day—a dismal, early January day—when reduced calendars were being torn and crushed and mashed into the packed cakes of

snow that the customers brought in from the street, and that melted in the aisles—on the day that Maggie first appeared in what might have been called her normal form, he heard the congratulations that the busy girls flung at her from all sides, and congratulated himself that he was partly responsible at least. Even if he hurt her some day, poor kid, or if, rather, her affection for him hurt her, there would be something on the ledger in his favour; he would have done her more good than harm.

She had done no more than electrify everyone by discarding magnificently, and without permission, the disfiguring ticking apron. That was all. But the effect was astonishing. She wore a plain, slim, short black dress, made of three yards of ninety-nine cent material, and a thirty-three cent set of embroidered collar and cuffs. Her hair, magnificent golden hair, incidentally, full of whirls and curves, was loosely massed on her small head.

That was all, but it was enough. Everybody looked at her, everybody praised her, and the packing-room boys went down like a row of ten-pins.



A United Artists Production My Best Girl
"I NEVER WOULD HAVE COME HERE, MA'AM, IF I HAD KNOWN,"



"They're all crazy about you!" Joe said, enjoying the sensation.

"Crazy is right!" she said indifferently. It was on this same day that she said to Joe, with a carefully careless air:

"I'll bet, if you fell in love, Joe, it would be with a regular young lady, wouldn't it?"

"How do you mean, regular young lady?" Ioe asked.

"Well, I mean—you know, a—a nice—sort of smiling—" Maggie floundered—"I mean—" she began again desperately—"mean, for instance, that there are lots of girls in this store that you couldn't call young

ladies!" she said, turning scarlet.

Conners, the window decorator, was going to do a biscuit window after closing time that night, and Joe was neatly stacking boxes and boxes of small sweet crackers in readiness beside the window. Maggie was handing them to him, in twos, from the wheeled truck.

"No, you might call them nice girls," Joe conceded, "and you might call them smart girls. But, no, you'd hardly call them young ladies."

"Like school-teachers and lib'arians," said Maggie, her docile eyes on his face.

"Yep. I guess school-teachers and librarians would be young ladies all right," Joe laughed. "Leave it to you to think a thing like that!" he said.

"My aunt—Pop's sister—were a schoolteacher," said Maggie.

"Did she was?"

"My aunt," Maggie corrected it firmly, "was a school-teacher. Joe," she diverged, "doesn't 'were' always sound like better grammar than 'was,' to you? It does to me!" And after a few minutes, still passing the packages of fig bars and lemon snaps briskly, she asked, awkwardly and quickly, in rather an ashamed voice, "Joe, how would a person who wasn't a lady get to be one? Somebody must of commenced, once, you know."

His heart ached for her, even though he wanted to laugh.

"Well, reading the backs of newspapers and magazines about manners, for one thing," he was beginning, when she interrupted him.

"Oh, honest, now-no joshing, Joe!"

"But I mean it," he said seriously. "That helps a lot, and to be always looking for the right way to do things, to be quiet and gentle and listen to the way nice persons speak. And then, of course, there's always the rule," he ended, remembering it from some long-ago conversation, and delighted to rest upon it, "there's always the rule that a lady puts the feelings of others before her own—thinks of others first."

He saw, from her blazing eyes, that she was assimilating this in her own voracious way.

"Nice things all join together, don't they, Joe?" she said, in deep thought.

"I don't get you, Miss Johnson."

"Here's what I was thinkin'. Last Sunday in church they said something about believin' that you have a good thing, an' you have it. Not will have it, but have it. An' that's like the ideel life—I wrote that up on the same card. It was in my prayer book, an' I got it all straight. Now, those two things go together, don't they, Joe?"

"They do," he said, struck. "But I think

that you were smart to see that, Maggie."

She was thinking. She gave but a brief

abstracted smile to his compliment.

"Thinkin' first of others ain't so hard," she said now. "If you love 'em, you think of 'em anyway, an' workin' and lovin'——"

"Maggie-if you love me-"

"Oh, gee-gee-gee-gee!" she amended impatiently. "But now, lissen, Joe," she resumed seriously, "here's what I want to ask you. Could anyone who wasn't born to be a lady now, f'rinstance, like me-my mother talks a lot about my grandmother Petheridge, but -but my mother-" she hesitated-"you wouldn't say she was always puttin' others first, and thinkin-ger an' servin-ger others before she does herself. You couldn't-honest! -say that, Joe. So that-" Again she paused. "An' 'Lizabeth positively is not a lady!" she admitted regretfully. "The boy 'Lizabeth is going with is sort of-well, sort of making a good deal of money," Maggie admitted delicately. "He has a car, Joe, and he dresses—well, he looks like a pitcher!"

"Looks like a Chinese, huh?"

"His name is Chess Rivers," she was con-

tinuing, when she interrupted herself. "How do you mean he is a Chinaman?" she demanded suspiciously.

"Because you said that he looked like a pitcher, darling, and most pitchers are made of china."

"I meant a pitcher of a man wearing a collar, or society clothes—like that," Maggie elucidated, nonplussed.

"Not a picture, Miss Johnson?"

"Picked—yure. Picture—picture—picture." She said it rapidly over and over, under her breath. "And what was the other one? Amat—tyrrh. Picture. Amateur. Well, anyway, I do not think Liz is a lady—not yet, anyway. But Joe—do you think——"

Again she floundered. "I guess I couldn't!" she said hastily, shrinking back, gallant, and he saw she was trying to save his feelings. "You don't have to tell me, Joe," she said.

He banked half-a-dozen little boxes deftly, with long, aristocratic hands, glanced at her soberly. And then suddenly his smile, the smile she loved so, flashed over his face, and he said:

"Maggie, I not only believe you could, but I believe you will!"

"Well, if you say so," she almost sang, and she rattled joyously away, with the empty truck bumping ahead of her.

On the next Sunday he went to see her. The costume he wore, checked suit, fearful and wonderful mustard-coloured overcoat and light hat, had come, necktie and all, out of a costumer's box. Joe, assuming it, and grinning at the race-track tout who looked back at him from his mirror, asked himself if he was a skunk to do what he was doing, and then added, for the sake of his own peace of mind, that he was really doing nothing at all. It amused him to dress suitably for his daily work in the humble capacity of stock clerk in one of his father's stores. What harm in that? And it amused him to costume also for a call on Goat Hill, on one of the women clerks. Why not dress for that, too? He certainly couldn't wear pearl gray gaiters, striped trousers, morning coat, and silk hat on this occasion. In this outrageous guise he would look quite right to Miss Maggie Johnson, and in any other he might puzzle her.

And as far as the last detail was concerned, he was quite right. There were other checked suits in the neighbourhood that day, and other mustard-coloured overcoats. And Maggie was delighted with him.

Delighted, that is, after the staggering shock of having her young man discover the Johnson family in the full, comfortable leisure of Sunday afternoon. Joe had had a late breakfast, had started for a game of golf, had been deterred by sudden spring rains, and now, at two o'clock, had costumed himself with only Allen's help and connivance, and had reached the Johnson cottage in the neighbourhood of three o'clock. But the Johnsons observed a different schedule, and were just finishing the hearty two o'clock dinner that was the one real meal of the day.

Wet, cold rain was falling steadily upon the disreputable garden and the battered scalloped poles that had once made quite a handsome fence. The back yard was a dismal region of dripping planks and wires and ropes, and when Joe turned the little metal bell that decorated the central panel of the shabby porch door—he had never rung a bell like that before—he had to wait a few cold, wet, silent minutes before footsteps, audibly approaching through the house, notified him that it had been heard.

The amazing bob and smile of Miss Elizabeth Johnson had presented themselves.

"Oh, fevvens sakes," she had said, in undisguised disgust, "I thought it was—I thought

you was my friend!"

She had, however, admitted him. And for want of any guidance,—for Liz, after a shout of "Maggie! Man here!" had almost immediately disappeared into what later proved to be her bedroom door,—Joe had followed the little hall into an empty dining room smelling of rotting apples and dust, and had put his head in at the kitchen doorway.

Ma Johnson, a heavy, woollen kimono tied about her ample form with draggled tassels, was in the rocker. Her hair hung in a comfortable tousle, loosened, yet not quite fallen upon her shoulders. She wore her glasses, her ankles were bare, her feet in large slippers, and in one puffy hand she grasped a pencil. In the other hand was a strip of news-

paper containing death notices and funeral announcements.

At the sink stood a nondescript, forlorn little figure that Joe could not for some minutes at all identify with the gallant picture he had formed of Maggie's father. Len Johnson was in his shirt-sleeves, his cheeks were very red from the warmth of the room and the recent hearty meal, his childish blue eyes were fixed upon the newcomer expectantly. He was girded from armpits to ankles in an old gray apron, his gray hair was fuzzed about the bald spot on his mild head. In his hands were the mud-coloured towel and the plate he was carefully wiping.

Behind the table and between the sink and the stove was Maggie; she had evidently finished washing the dishes, for the plates, spoons, and glasses were all inverted, and drooling cool water, on the slanting ramp of the sink. Maggie had abandoned this field for the moment, and was now briskly conserving the remains of the meal—a good meal it looked, too, Joe thought. She was transferring fried chicken, baked sweet potatoes, and

creamed onions to a large plate, destined, as he presently observed, for the cooler outside the window; she was pouring odds and ends of milk together, and gathering scraps of butter thriftily on a common saucer.

She wore a rather small tight dress of some sort of washable silk, pongee perhaps, Joe thought, but washed now to a creamy white, and open at her beautiful young throat; her face was deliciously flushed, and her hair was flowing loose in a flood of glory, caught back over her small ears only by a pin on either side.

She looked at him, over the big spoon and the platter, and the light that never was on land or sea shone suddenly in her eyes. Joe had time to think confusedly that she was beautiful—little Maggie Johnson!—and that he was sorry that he'd come—it would only complicate things, before she said delightedly, in her happy little voice:

"Well, what do you know! I never heard you ring. If it isn't Joe Grant! Joe, have you had dinner?"

"Just up from the table. Hello, Maggie," Joe said, grinning.

"This is my mother, make you acquainted with my father, Pop, this is Joe Grant," said Maggie. "Ma, this is the feller that works at the store—since Jimmy Unger left. Hello, Joe."

Ma, perhaps conscious of her bare ankles, was being magificent. She was evidently not favourably impressed by Maggie's friend.

"I didn't know you expected a caller,

Maggie."

"I didn't, Ma. Sit down, Joe. You don't have to finish those if you don't want to, Pa. I hate to have you—take off your apron."

Joe saw that the loyal, loving little face was scarlet with shame. She didn't want Pa to be belittled! She was trying to take the dish towel away.

"Sometimes—my father—kinder helps me, Joe," she stammered, with her gallant little smile.

"I don't mind wipin' 'em one bit, Maggie," her father's mild voice said surprisedly.

"I'll help you," said Joe.

And again he saw that he had quite innocently and unwittingly tightened the chain that bound Maggie's ardent soul to his. She flashed him a look so grateful that it almost took his breath away.

"Maggie's not one to let anyone stand round doing nothing, Mr. Johnson," Joe said, putting his hat and coat on a chair in the corner of the kitchen and helping himself to a dish towel.

"No, that's right!" the older man said, with an appreciative cackle. He set to work with renewed interest, and Joe, laying a plate on the drain board face down, rubbed its back stimulatingly, as he might have rubbed a baby's back.

Maggie was bunching her glorious hair together with both her hands.

"I washed my hair about eleven, and it's

just about dry," she explained.

"When we haven't a maid we eat out here. It just seems dreadful, but you know how it is, Mr. Grant," Ma explained comfortably. "I enjoy miserable health—miserable, and I can't get around like I'd like to. Poor folks have to make a good many short cuts, I always say. I'm one that's always had," Ma ended, with a significant emphasis on the last word, and an eloquent glance that invited

sympathy. "So it don't come very easy for me

to put up with this sort of thing."

"I see," Joe said, nodding. And Maggie once more visibly registered her conviction that whatever Joe Grant said or did was beyond all questioning the right thing to do or say. "Lord!" Joe thought, in his secret heart, "I wish she wouldn't do that! Poor kid. Poor kid. I wonder what I'm here for anyway?"

"Native son?" asked Pa sociably.

"Beg pardon, Mr. Johnson?"

Pa cleared his throat.

"Born here, eh?"

"Oh! Oh, yes, I'm a native."

"That's a terrible thing about those two brothers being burned under their motor, isn't it?" asked Ma.

"Tough. I saw that."

"It's going to be an immense funeral," Ma observed. "Maggie, open a winder, dearie. It gets so close in here I can feel my heart—I have a valvular leakage, anyway," Ma explained.

"Maggie!" This was Elizabeth's highkeyed voice, from the direction of the bedrooms. "Bring me in the curling iron, will you? It's out there somewhere!"

Maggie snatched something up, instantly disappeared. Joe heard voices, fancied he heard laughter, and once again Liz's comment upon the unexpected, "Oh, fevvens sakes!"

When the kitchen was in pretty good order and Joe's attentive eyes had had time to discover above the sink the ideal leaflet, "The way to begin living the ideal life is—to begin," and a thousand other details of the room, he sat down on the edge of a chair, and cleared his throat, and said politely:

"Mrs. Johnson, if you've no objection, could Maggie go out with me for a while?"

But why—why—why did he say it?—he asked himself almost immediately, noting the radiance of her small face, the spring in her small figure, like a race horse straining to go, the smile in her blue eyes.

"Oh, Ma---"

"Why, I haven't no objections," Mrs. Johnson said discontentedly, after a moment. "Maggie isn't nothing but a child, Mr. Grant," said Ma, when the girl had flashed

away to put on her hat, "an' her father an' I don't want her to get no silly notions into her head."

"I understand that," Joe said, clearing his throat.

"Temp'rarily—temp'rarily she has accepted a position in a—well, in a five-and-ten," said Ma.

"I work there myself, you know, Mrs. Johnson."

"I've no doubt you do! An' I've no doubt it's a real nice place an' all that," conceded Ma loftily. "But it isn't Maggie's sort of placeand if Mr. Johnson had had the sense he was born with, everything would of gone diff'rent with us. My folks were all of a very diff'rent sort—but I fell in love, like all foolish, romantic girls do, an' had to pick, of course, the very last feller in the world I should of married! Isn't that a girl for you? My folks were against it—I didn't see why then; I do now. They said that he wouldn't never succeed at anything, and they were right, because, between you and I, Mr. Johnson has been real unfortunate in business—which I am as innocent as the babe of, for I'm not in the least a

business woman myself—my mind is more like a lawyer's mind—I'll put my finger right on the spot, every time, and nobody can't keep nothin' away from me—our girls would of been raised like they ought to of been!"

Joe, following this confidence with some confusion of spirit, wondered how the old man liked the description of himself. He had drawn the spectacles down from the fluffy crown of his head, and was reading the newspapers meekly, unobtrusively, in a rocker that flanked the one that was creaking under the weight of his wife.

"To put the whole thing into a nutshell—" Mrs. Johnson was resuming briskly, when Joe's opportunity to discover whether she was really capable of this elision was destroyed by Maggie's abrupt reëntrance into the kitchen, and in another minute they were out in the dull, cold, wintry Sunday street, and she was dancing along at his side in wild spirits and—he thought surprisedly extraordinary beauty.

Her cheeks glowed red, her eyes glittered, and when she laughed—and Maggie was always ready to laugh—her teeth shone like enamel.

"Lord, what a devilish wind!"

"Oh, I kind of love it, it's so fresh! It's a real spring wind, Joe."

"Spring! February."

"Well, it is. It feels as if it was bringin' was bringin-ger something, and what else but spring?"

"Want to go to a movie, Maggie?"

"Oh, I'd love it!"

"How about The Highwayman?"

"Oh, Joe, no! That's a sixty-cent show. There are lots of nice little ones over on Chelsea Avenue here for twenty-five."

They were at the window, he put down his money. But there were nothing left on this Sunday afternoon but loges, at a dollar a chair. Maggie's face fell, and immediately her eyes widened and she caught at his arm.

"Joe, don't be a fool! Two dollars! It isn't worth it!"

But he saw her give a little bounce of sheer excitement and felicity as they went in past the mirrors and marble columns and red boundary ropes, and he thought it was. Their seats were in the very front of the balcony—deep, comfortable seats, with wide arms.

Joe, in the warm gloom, with organ music straining all about them, and the story on the screen unfolding under Maggie's passionately attentive stare, was conscious of a stir of real affection for the little creature beside him. Very cunning and companionable and real was Maggie. Her shoulder lurched involuntarily against his, in the tenser moments, and once he found his big cold fingers gripped feverishly by her small, warm ones.

"This'll all come out right, Joe, you'll see!" she whispered confidently. "He isn't going to get away with it—Herbert van der Peyster, I mean." And she added, a little fearfully, "You think it'll come out all right, don't you, Joe?"

"Sure it will!"

They sat on in silence, and he began to wish that she would have something further to say. It was pleasant, somehow, to have that earnest little fragrant baby face come close to his in the dark, and that fuzzy aureole of gold brush his cheek, and that eager little whisper reach his ears.

"Joe!" She was doing it again. Her shoulder was against his, her fingers gripping tight, her mouth close to his big, hard, dark jaw. "Joe, if someone died when they were makin' a movie, would they run it?"

"What? Don't hear you." But he had heard her perfectly.

She earnestly, painstakingly, repeated the question. And Joe kept his handsome head bent close to hers, and leaned his shoulder even closer, and said reassuringly that he was almost sure that if a man was killed when a movie was being made, they wouldn't be quite so heartless as ever to use that movie.

Her face was beaming with satisfaction and wet with tears when they came out into the chilly dusk. The streets were full of other men and other girls, hurrying homeward now, and the counter where Joe took Maggie for soda was filled with other happy couples.

"I think I'll take my mother a Hokum-Pokum Bar, and Pa a Here-Comes-Charlie," said Maggie.

Joe let her pay ten cents for them, simply because she looked so aghast at the idea that he should—when she had practically asked for them! But in parting he presented her with an enormous box of sweets, up to this moment carried inconspicuously under his arm.

"Oh, Joe Grant! Oh, Joe—two pounds! Oh,

thank you-thank you!"

"Oh, hush," he said. "Now you run in and I'll watch you until you're inside the door."

She fled up the path, tried the knob of the porch door, called a joyous "Good-night and thank you!" into the dark, was silhouetted against a gush of red light, and then was gone.

Joe walked two blocks to his car, raging at

himself.

"Gosh, what a fool I am! What on earth did I do that for?"

CHAPTER IX

A LL the way through the city, and out into the suburbs, he remembered the day in confused snatches, the dreadful mother with her unctuous voice and idle, fat hands, the shrill-voiced, dictatorial sister with her "Fevvens sakes!" the meek little browbeaten mouse of a father, tied into an apron, mildly washing dishes.

And Maggie, with that boiling glory of golden hair tumbled all over her small head, curves and ringlets and delicate little feathers of it, hanging on her slender little shoulders like a cape of sunshine, falling into freshly lovely positions when she tried to toss it back, every hair of it glittering and alive, from the drake's-tails of bright metal that touched her forehead to the pouring sea of it that flowed down her back.

Millicent Russell, sitting next to him at dinner, was a pretty girl. From a point an inch or two below her armpits, to a point an inch or two above her knees, she was packed into a tube of spangled satin. Her arms were heavy with links of gold and platinum, her legs looked bare, if they were not actually bare, her feet were elevated dizzily upon pinnacles of gold leather. Her cheeks were smoothly and brilliantly rouged, her lips stiff with grease, her eyebrows shaved into two startling, inky arcs. Millicent's breath was thick of alcohol and nicotine, her eyelids, coloured with blue oil, were lowered with fatigue and boredom, and she had no more hair than her brother had.

"I thought you had to go to prison to get a clip like that!" said Joe.

"Isn't it adorable? They call it the cocotte,"

Millicent told him enthusiastically.

"It's a crown of glory. If I were a girl," Joe said, with sudden fire, "I'd have hair. Beautiful braids and curls and masses—of hair. It's pretty!"

"Say the word, Joe, and I'll be your little covered wagon," suggested Millicent, in an odd tone, and with a daring little laugh.

"Nothing doing. I'm in coll," Joe answered. "You're not in coll! You're working. I like

you an awful lot, Joe," Millicent said, screwing out her cigarette, her eyes lowered, a little moisture forming on her lashes. "You think I'm crazy, saying this. Perhaps I am. But—" her voice was husky—"but I like you an awful lot, Joe."

Girls always said that to him, and presumably to all the other fellows, when an evening had reached about this point, Joe reflected. That was the way persons got engaged, nowadays. They sat about at tea tables, or dinner tables, or the tables at supper clubs, until they got sentimental and stupid, and then the girls had it all their own way. Men didn't do the love-making, nowadays; the girls did. They picked their man and said a few lazy, apparently impromptu things like this to him, and then the next day he found he was engaged—hard and tight.

Millicent was trying it now. Right here, at the Carters' hot, crowded, stupid party, Millicent Russell was trying to land him. Not that she loved him, he wasn't quite so dull as to think that. But it would enchant her ambitious mother, and interest and excite her set, and be a good match from every standpoint. And Millicent had two older sisters at home: one divorced, with a grievance, and the other unmarried, and tremendously active on committees and boards and in charity entertainments and altruistic schemes of all sorts. Millicent would be glad to get out of it.

"Nothing stirring," he said briefly. "Come on, let's dance."

Millicent raised the heavy eyelids, looked at him with superb insolence.

"Who's the other woman, Joe?" she drawled theatrically. She was not suffering, but she felt obliged to add, as she surrendered herself to his arms, and they glided out upon the packed, smoke-veiled floor, "God, you are a brute!"

"There isn't any other woman!" He believed it. Yet, even now, when his face was close to Millicent's curled, perfumed bobbed head, he had a sudden memory of Maggie, childlike and eager, in a sleazy little faded white dress, with a mop of living gold tumbling upon her small shoulders.

The dance ended, and he and Millicent and half-a-dozen other jaded, bored young per-

sons came back to the tumbled table. The girls lighted fresh cigarettes and rouged and powdered their faces as they talked; ashes and matches and cigarette butts were mashed into the richly creamed lobster; the chicken grew cold, the elaborate salad of alligator pear and hearts of palm, with a dressing that hours of labour had perfected, was carried away broken, ruined, and untasted.

One or two of the youngest girls were healthily flushed by dancing; most of them were pallid, with an unnatural shine on their faces, and hollows under their oiled and darkened eyes. The heat of the smoke-shrouded room was intense, and dust from the floor mingled with the smoke. Dangling fringes of cotton palms, strings of lights, and draped ropes of raffia from the points of enormous brightly striped beach umbrellas supposedly gave the closed city room the aspect of a holiday beach. Waiters, perspiring, rushed with tilting trays through the confusion, and saxophones blared and whined without cessation. Many of the young revellers were half intoxicated, the girls tearful and earnest, the

men hilarious; pleated dress shirts were crumpled, and little crêpe and satin gowns wrinkled and streaked with perspiration.

"I supposed the Johnson kitchen was the height of vulgarity," Joe thought, "and this is Society at its happiest, and all is well!"

Sunday night. It was an actual relief to think that to-morrow would be Monday, and he would be back in the clean busy stir of the Mack again.

He told himself, when Monday arrived, and he reached the store to find a demurely radiant Maggie prettier and more endearingly proprietary in her manner toward him than ever, that this nonsense must stop. Therefore, it was with a real surprise that he heard himself saying to her, late on Tuesday afternoon:

"What you doing to-night, Maggie?"

"Night school," she answered, colour and breath beginning their usual acceleration instantly.

"Night school! I didn't know you went to night school!"

"Why—why, but you told me to!" she accused him, reproachfully.

"I-when did I? How do you mean?"

"Before Christmas. Just after we first began to talk. You said, 'Maggie, you ought to

go to night school!""

"Did I?" He was stricken. Apparently, one couldn't say anything, however harmless, before this voracious child without running the risk that her entire life might be influenced. "What do you study?" he asked.

"Oh-" Her voice wavered vaguely, her eyes, with their innocent appeal, moved to his. He saw that she was afraid he would laugh at her, "Political economy and French," she answered bravely.

"That's a darn good choice!" Joe assured her. "If ever you go abroad, you don't want to be embarrassed about pronouncing words."

"Well, but I wouldn't know German and

Eyetalian words," she submitted quickly.

"Yes, but you don't really need them, Maggie. French is the language everywhere. Even in Russia-"

She was staring at him suspiciously again.

"Joe Grant, how'd you know that?"

"Everyone knows that!" he answered, laughing uncomfortably.

"I didn't. But then—" her voice sank to a

murmur, and took on the tones of a dove's note; she drooped in discouragement—"but then, I don't know much," she said.

"Maggie!" came a harsh voice from upstairs at this point. "Maggie Johnson! What's happened you down there in the stockroom? If you haven't blue-moulded, maybe you'd be so condescendin' as to start your trotters up here with them felay medallions! The customer says she's fifty years old now, an' she doesn't come of a very long-lived family!"

"Oh, holy Nelly!" Maggie ejaculated, seizing the green cards upon which the medallions were stitched, and fleeing wildly from Joe's too seductive neighbourhood. "She sent me

down for them fifteen minutes ago."

She left Joe very thoughtful. He watched her more closely than usual for a day or two, and then took an opportunity, when they chanced to be entering the automat together for a late luncheon, to say deliberately:

"Look here, Maggie. I've got something on my mind to say to you, and by George, I'm going to say it. I'm only twenty, but I've seen a lot more of the world than you have, and I want to warn you. Don't waste time, at seventeen, taking any crush too seriously."

She was moving along before the glassed boxes of food, thoughtfully plunging a nickel in here and there, and steadying her tray by wedging it firmly between her person and the wall. Now she looked over her shoulder and smiled maternally, indulgently at him, as one infinitely wise in the ways of the world, and quite able to take care of herself.

When they were seated on high stools, the marble slab of the counter between them, and their food tastefully arranged on paper napkins, she asked, still with that lofty air of superiority and amusement:

"Who do you think I've got a crush on, Joe?"

"I know damn' well whom you've got a crush on!" Joe growled.

"Is zat so?" Maggie asked, flushing, laughing, a little confused, and looking more than ordinarily pretty under the combined emotions of fear, pride, and joy. "Suppose the person I had a crush on had a crush on me?" she asked, finishing her milk, setting down her

glass, and looking up at him innocently and

composedly.

"A person might like you a lot, Maggie, and wish for all sorts of good things for you," Joe said rather slowly. "A person might think you had a lot of pluck and want to help you get along—without—without, I say, having a crush on you!"

"Well, that'd be enough for me," she answered, still in the same audacious, high-spirited key. "I don't want any kissin', an' as for pettin' parties, Pop would simply lock the door on me, and I'd spend the night in the street!"

She piled their plates and saucers, cups and spoons neatly, revolved on her stool, placed the discarded dishes on an empty table behind her, wiped the marble slab with a paper napkin, and set forth the two pieces of pie, with great efficiency.

"Exactly," Joe said then, in a tone of triumph. "You don't want any kissing. And you ought to want kissing, and you will want kissing, when the real thing comes! And until then, you only make yourself miserable by—

by falling in love, or trying to!"

"When I want them—those things," Maggie said serenely, "I'll go after them. And, believe me, I'll get them! Men care more for that sort of thing than girls do, anyway," she finished airily.

Joe leaned across the marble slab and

gripped her hand with one of his own. "Now, look here, you little idiot," he said, half angry and half laughing, "don't you think you can get away with that sort of thing! When your hour strikes, my dear, you won't be so sure you can get what you want! You'll be sick for more than kisses, then, Maggie, and afraid to take them. The whole world will turn itself into a sort of blur, with a man in the centre, and when he speaks you'll answer, and you'll say what he wants you to say, too. Don't fool yourself. You and I are friends -friends-friends-I was down and out when we first began to talk together, and you gave me a right steer, and it kind of made you like me. But a man will come along some day, Maggie, and then you'll look back on all this fooling with me, following me round, and giggling and whispering—as so much baby talk! I mean it. I like you-I love you-I

think you're a perfectly keen kid. But that kind of love's different. You're too young to know anything about it. Believe me, it's got a lot of pain in it, and it leaves a scar—you don't get over it——''

She had begun by laughing, boldly, albeit with uncomfortable eyes, and with a flush on her cheek. After that she had sobered, to listen to him, lashes wide, lips slightly parted, little felt hat pushed back to show a film of gold across her earnest forehead. Finally, the colour had ebbed from her face, and putting her elbows on the table, she had covered her face with her hands—those small hard, red hands that Joe found so infinitely pathetic.

"God help me, it's that way with me now, Joe!" she whispered, not meeting his eyes.

They walked back to the store in absolute silence.

CHAPTER X

NE night in early February, it chanced that at the Merrill table there were dining but three lone men: George Howard Merrill, president of the entire chain of stores, his trusty right-hand man and general manager, one Frank Flint, and the son of the house, Joseph Grant Mackenzie Merrill.

The last named was included in the party merely because he happened to be in the house, with no dinner engagement and because a wild rain was falling. George Merrill cared no longer whether his son and heir came or went.

Yet he had blindly idolized his son, as a baby, had forgiven all his school-day exploits, kept him buried in money, and highly enjoyed giving "the boy" his first car, his golf sticks, his country club membership, and every other ridiculous luxury that a father whose own youth had been hard and poor, could supply.

That young Joe had shown a lamentable indifference to society, and had flunked in college, after disposing of a small fortune in various idiotic, if not actually harmful ways, had been a bitter blow to the father's honest, hardworking pride, and the mother's much less admirable article. They had grieved over their son as if, in that December week when he came home expelled and disgraced and in debt, he had actually died.

Since, however, he was actually living, they had begun, for the first time in his twenty years, to permit him, in their disgust and disappointment, to find his own level. He had moped about the house for a few days, defended himself with angry bursts of half-assimilated socialism, damned all colleges, sneered at lineage, birth, and culture, and had finally, they knew, secured some sort of job that at least kept him busy and out of the grosser forms of mischief.

"I think he's secretly studying law, Howard," his mother said.

"I shouldn't wonder if the kid is working on that socialist newspaper he is always quoting," suggested his father. "I hope to God Mr. Joe isn't in with a bunch of crooks and stick-up men and wharf rats and them sort!" said grim, lean Lizzie Kane, who had been his first nurse. But this last was the theory to which the servants of the household secretly leaned.

Joe lifelessly presented his mother and father with Christmas gifts, and was not too preoccupied, too openly bored, at the formal family dinner on that festal night. Now and then, as time went on, he joined the family at dinner, not rude, not cordial, simply another person at the board.

Also he went about to dinners and dances, but not many. He pleaded his "research work" as an excuse for living rather quietly at home.

So that on this particular evening, upon seeing three places set at the family board, his father, scowlingly interrogating the butler, merely shrugged when the answer was that the third place was for Mr. Joseph.

"Oh, he don't matter!" said George Merrill, who, like Maggie, was occasionally free with his English. "We want to talk business, and if it was Mrs. Merrill I'd ask her to have her dinner upstairs," said the master of the house. "But Mr. Joe's all right. He won't hear a word we say!"

"I wish he would," Frank Flint, a big, rosy, silver-headed man, said politely. "We want that boy in the business, some day."

The time had been when George Merrill would have replied: "Well, no—I don't know about that. Mother wants him to try something a cut above that; maybe we'll put him in the family law firm, her brothers and uncle ain't doing any too well!"

But to-night he responded simply: "My God, Frank, I don't know what he's doing, or what he wants to do! They're too much for me, nowadays. He's busy about something—it won't last. But while it keeps him out of mischief—or out of jail——

"I'd be glad enough," said Joe's father, shaking out a stiff napkin that was the size of a small tablecloth and of the resistance of cardboard. "I'd be glad enough to have him get interested in the Mack. If he seems to catch on to anything to-night, as we talk, Frank, see if you can draw him out."

"Sorry to be late," said Joe, at this point, coming in.

"You're not late," his father assured him ungraciously. Sometimes, in the course of the last few years, his disappointment in this boy had risen almost to actual hatred.

There were other times, naturally, when he had merely tolerated Joe, paying his bills, avoiding his chatter and his associates when that was possible, forgetting his son, as many another father did, in all the intervals.

But just of late, ever since, in fact, that terrible scene when his mother had called him a "commoner, without one single gentlemanly instinct in his mind or soul," and when he, his father, had shouted at Joe that he was no better than a pickpocket, there had seemed to be a queer change in the boy.

He was still ungracious enough, ugly, sullen, silent enough in all conscience; he was sneering, supercilious, resentful to the last degree. And yet he was sober, and at home, and even working, in some obscure way, and his father slept the better for knowing it. He felt to-night an odd emotion of sympathy for his boy. Perhaps not all kids liked college; perhaps not all that money had gone for selfish amusement and display. Joe had shouted

something at him, on the never-to-be-forgotten morning of the quarrel, about "the cause." He had been a funny little boy, a sympathetic, honest sort of little boy; sometimes now he seemed, oddly, to be that little boy still. Perhaps—perhaps the society to which his mother's high birth entitled him wasn't what the boy needed or wanted.

"Tired, Joe?"
"I beg pardon?"

"Say you look tired, my boy. Research—" said George Merrill, with a wink for his general manager.

"Nope. Yes, I am a little tired. Not much," Joe said unsatisfactorily, falling upon his soup.

The conversation went on without him. He did not speak again until Allen was doing a sort of triumphal march about the table, the sliced brown skin lying like a buckler on the cream white of the conquered turkey's breast, Evans and Molly solemnly bringing up the rear with onions and cranberry sauce.

Then Joe said mildly, in a pause: "You say that it's the ruined stock that costs in the Mack Stores—not the labour. I've thought of that.

It seems to me that every day enough collars and writing paper and candy and toys and socks fall on the floor and are trampled to set up a separate branch!"

Frank Flint and George Merrill looked at

the speaker in utter stupefaction.

"Seems we have a customer present!" Flint said then jovially.

"Where'd you get this, Joe?" asked his

father.

"Oh—one notices things. Molly, bring that chestnut stuff back, will you? I went into—Number Seven, I think it is," said Joe.

"On Eighth?"

"About there."

"That's Number Seven. Good for you! I hope you got service," said Flint.

"They have a great staff there," said Joe.

"That's a good store. That's a good store,"

Flint agreed.

"What occurred to me," Joe said leisurely, "was that you—we, I might say—could handle all that small stuff very much better with an automat. That wouldn't save any salaries, but it would save a lot of small stuff—to say nothing of sneak thieves."

George Merrill smiled indulgently; Frank Flint remained unstirred.

"The great objection to that," the latter began smoothly. He shook his head at the salad. He had eaten excessively of five previous courses; he remembered his diet now and waved the tomatoes and lettuce away.

"That's an idea, Joe, but unfortunately it's not practical," his father said genially, comfortably.

Then his eye and the eye of his general manager met.

"Why isn't it practical, Frank? It works all right on the food—they're opening those damn nickel-in-the-slot places all over town," George Merrill said. "They're practical."

"We-ell-" Frank Flint hesitated.

Joe broke in:

"Take the whole back wall of a store and handle the five- and the ten-cent stuff there. Let 'em drop pennies for their spools and soap and ink and pencils and can openers and hairpins. You could have a girl there to change their money——"

He broke off to consult the butler.

"Allen, any more of that cheese there?

Bring Mr. Flint and myself some, will you? This is great stuff, Mr. Flint, you'll like it."

"I'm not at all sure, Joe," said his father explosively, with something like a most unwonted excitement shaking his voice. "I'm not at all sure that you haven't given us an idea."

Flint pondered, smearing the cheese on a cracker, looking thoughtfully from father to son.

"I could look into that, Mr. Merrill," he said, his eyes kindling as he meditated the project.

"It would go big in the advertising, Flint!"
The general manager's voice trembled with emotion.

"It might—catch on, Mr. Merrill. It would be an exclusive Mack feature, you know."

"Oh, they'd all copy us—they'd copy us like lightning! But that wouldn't matter. Frank, the more I think of that, the more I suspect that—there's—something—in—it," George Merrill, drawling his words portentously, said slowly. "When could you see Burke?"

"See him to-morrow."

"Take that up with him, will you, Frank?

And take it up fast," said the president of the Mack. "Find out who makes that machinery. We might as well look into it, anyway."

"The idea belongs to a seventeen-year-old kid from Goat Hill with dust two inches thick all over her," Joe wanted to say.

Wanted, yes, but not as much as somehow he wanted to keep that look in his father's eyes, that proud, vindicated look that said: "This boy of mine isn't—such—a—damn'—fool, after all!" It was too pleasant, it was too satisfying to Joe's injured pride to see his father ashamed and placating, he couldn't bring Maggie in. It wouldn't do her any harm to leave her out.

An hour later, he was reading in his room when his father came, rather shyly, rather awkwardly, in. The old boy had taken the trouble to come upstairs, Joe reflected, gratified.

"Joe, seen that girl who sings that 'Mouse-trap' thing, in the Revue?"

"Yes, sir. Saw it opening night."

"They've doped it up a good deal since then."

"Well, there was reason."

"I've got two seats." George Merrill displayed them deprecatingly. "I was going to take Flint," he said.

"I'd like to see that darn show again," Joe said. He knew his father very slightly, he had never asked himself whether or not he really liked him. But somehow it stirred him oddly to-night to see the old man standing in the doorway, getting a little gray, getting a little bowed, eager and awkward and friendly, as he looked with fierce, keen gray eyes at his son.

"We'll be a little late, but we'll get everything except those damn' skaters," George Merrill said.

"Keen stunt!" Joe agreed briefly.

That was all. Fifteen minutes later, they left the house together. It was the first time Joe Merrill had gone to the theatre with his father since the day of his fourteenth birthday treat.

"I passed along that idea of yours, about having an automat for the notions, to one of the heads," Joe told Maggie, somewhat ashamed of himself, and making at least this small start toward amends. "I took the credit for it, too!"

"Oh, Joe!" Her face was radiant. "Who'd you tell it to? Fleming?"

"Fleming!" He scoffed at Fleming. "No, but I told it to someone who'll see that Merrill himself gets hold of it," he said.

"You didn't!"

"I say I did. But what made me feel rotten," Joe confessed, curiously anxious to set himself right with her, ignorant as she was of the whole proceeding, "what made me feel rotten was that I didn't say that you had thought of it first."

"Oh, well, we sort of worked it out together, that day we were at the automat," she said, anxious to reassure him.

"Worked it out together nothing! You began it, it was entirely your idea."

Maggie's face remained radiant.

"But what's the difference, as long as one of us gets the credit?" she asked innocently.

Joe could only laugh uncomfortably. He felt uncomfortable about the whole affair. He was working in the office to-day, on the mezzanine floor at the back of the shop, and Mag-

gie had no business to be beside him. But here she was, delighted to have escaped on some pretext from the heat and noise and confusion of the store, and full of wiles to distract him and insinuate herself into his affairs.

"A lady was trying on hats, and one of the girls sold her hat—the customer's hat, I mean, Joe. She sold it for fifteen cents, and the customer made an awful row," said Maggie. "She says that the hat cost one-eighty-five—I says to the salesgirl that I saw the hat on the chair, and you could get ten of them for one-eighty-five. But, anyway, Smith says to give her a new hat and five dollars!"

"Ha!" Joe said, adding a column.

"I got even with a customer that was saucy to me yesterday," Maggie recounted with relish, after casting about in her mind for a subject likely to interest him. "Miss Ollie was busy, and there was no one at the counter, and she ast me would I sell her a screw for an alarm clock she had with her. She was a fussy old lady, Joe; first thing she says to me was: 'Is the five-cent screws just exactly as good as the fifteen-cent ones?' I says, 'Yes, madam, you'll find that five-cent articles is always just

as good or better than fifteen-cent ones. That's business, madam,' I says to her.

"Well, she gave me an awfully dirty look, Joe, and she called Smith—he hates—he dislikes me, anyway," Maggie resumed, "and she says: 'Kindly find me another salesgirl—this girl is very impudent.' So he pulled the usual stuff about firing me the minute the shop closed last night, and he made the sale himself, and he fixed the clock and gave it to me to wrap up for her. She says: 'Step along there as fast as you can, girl, because I'm meeting a friend on the four o'clock train.' Mind ju, she called me 'girl,' Joe——"

"Well, you look as much like a girl as anything else," Joe said.

"Oh, you think you're funny! But lissen what I did, Joe. I wrapped up the alarm, but first I set it for twelve minutes past four, both alarms, the intermittent and the steady. And she put it way down in the bottom of one of those string bags those old ladies carry. I wisht I'd been in the train, watching her and her friend talking, when it began to buzz!" exulted Maggie.

Joe laughed in spite of himself.

"You beat it back where you belong," he directed her, "and stop your nonsense, or you'll be fired!"

She flashed away, and when he went downstairs an hour later, she was quite genuinely too busy to notice him. Joe watched her as he went about; he reflected that that small form must ache from head to foot at the close of the day. Maggie ran, she dived, she climbed, she crawled, she laughed, and she glowed, she was saucy and was sweet, with one bewildering chameleon move after another. He saw Marge Connors and Paula Younger at the lampshade department, laughing at her, heard several of the girls teasing her, although he could not hear their words. Then she disappeared for awhile, and Joe, catching a last glimpse of her at closing time, noted that her lateafternoon pallor and grime had taken full possession of her lovely little face, and that the glory of her hair had slipped dowdily half down her back.

He managed, quite without stopping to analyze his sudden impulse to do so, to work his own way through the moving river of the departing employees of the Mack, and found himself beside her, in the lighted, shining black street. It was ten minutes past six o'clock.

"Why so fast, Maggie?"

She stopped under the street light, raised blazing eyes to his.

"How dare you speak to me! You ought to be ashamed to speak to me! I hate you!" she said, in a swift whisper.

"For heaven's sake, what's the matter?"

Joe stammered, aghast.

But she went quickly on, shabby little untidy head held high, and disappeared in the crowd before he could catch her again.

Joe walked briskly toward his car, got into

it, and drove toward Goat Hill.

"My gosh, I never saw her like that before! I wonder what the deuce I've done?" he kept saying aloud as he went.

But before he reached Washington Street he knew that he could not see her again tonight. It wouldn't—quite—do, it wasn't quite fair, to follow her home and show his concern and interest so plainly. She might construe anything from that, and her family, too, might easily deduce that Joe Grant was in love with Maggie Johnson. Certainly, their reconciliation would be nothing so much as that of lovers after a quarrel. No, it wouldn't quite do.

CHAPTER XI

E wondered, driving home and dressing for a dinner, how he was going to get through the hours until morning came again and brought another chance to talk to Maggie.

The dinner was at the club to-night; it was for pretty little Katrina Fairchild, and Katrina, eighteen and an heiress, was extremely drunk and shrieking with laughter at her own remarks. Millicent, next to Joe—every one was placing her next to Joe this winter—was beating powder into her rather coarse-pored, colourless skin with violent jerks of her elbow.

Every one in the room was bitterly bored: guests, waiters, musicians. Millicent began to press a morbid red paste upon her mouth and asked languidly:

"When are we going to announce it, Joe?—Don't interrupt me, Marion," she said to another girl, who leaned across the table for a hysterical confidence. "I'm proposing to Joe Grant."

"It can't be done. I tried it myself, didn't I, Joe?" a third girl, handsome and big, and anxious to be included in the conversation, contributed drawlingly.

"I don't seem to remember that, Carol," Joe said, eating. "But some night when I've had too many cocktails one of you girls will get me, and that'll be that."

There were shrieks of laughter, and then the conversation suddenly died, and nobody could think of anything to say.

"Keep the change," said Freddie Norton languishingly, to the cigarette girl. The change was from a five-dollar bill, offered to the girl for a twenty-five-cent package of cigarettes. The girls at the table were immensely diverted by Freddie. It seemed it was the fourth time he had done it, and, of course, the cigarette girl, they said delightedly, was simply reaping a golden harvest from Freddie.

"Now, you keep 'way, li'l' girl," said Freddie, "'cause I've spent all fives, an' I have

nussing but twensh-see?"

The little girl, as bobbed, marcelled, lipand-cheek-rouged as the rest, was extremely businesslike. She went demurely away to offer

her little paper boxes elsewhere, her gaudy Turkish apron pockets bulging with paper bills.

"She'll'limit?" Freddie asked appreciatively, pathetically. And the girls of his own class shrieked with mirth. To-morrow and the day after and for many days, they would ask each other, with an air of being almost consumed with enjoyment: "My dear, did you ever see anyone as funny as Freddie Norton at Katrina's dance? I thought we would all die."

Their conversations were entirely personal, usually first-personal at that.

"My dear, I—well, I—well, if you ask me—I couldn't—I told Mother—I—she and I—but it isn't as if I—exactly. I couldn't—I simply—if you could have seen me——"

They leaned across Joe, who sat smoking, silent, shifting his handsome dark eyes from one to another, well aware that they were talking for his benefit.

"Marjorie, did you see Mrs. Madison?"

"My dear-wasn't that terrible!"

"Oh, well, my dear, if she would bring that impossible girl—"

"Well, exactly!"

More lip-red, more powder, more cigarettes.

"Of course, Mother felt dreadfully about it."

"Well, but, my dear!"

"Well, exactly—that's what I said to Mother."

"And, of course, it was just as awkward as it could possibly be!"

"I know."

"But what can one do, my dear!"

"Well, exactly."

Joe thought he would observe Maggie tomorrow and see, if she talked only vapid, halfconnected, inconsequential personalities. But he knew she didn't! And then he suddenly recalled that she was angry with him, and was conscious of a little thrill of pleasure. It would be rather fun making it up with the little termagant, whatever it was. She was a vital person, whatever her shortcomings and educational deficiencies.

He got through the evening and went home at two o'clock. The real enthusiasm of the affair, if indeed it had boasted any, had been well over by eleven o'clock; after that it had all dragged for everyone. But it would never do to have the Fairchild party over before midnight; any party—every party must drag along until the morning hours, or it was a failure.

The boys were crumpled and lank of hair at two o'clock, the girls jaded, their skins like paste, their mouths hanging like red flowers on the pallor of their faces. But they could all say to-morrow: "My dear, we danced until two! Unger Field bribed the musicians to give us another hour—I don't know how he did it. Well, exactly!"

The uniformed waiters would carry away the mashed, ash-mixed, expensive food, and roll the big stiff napkins into balls, and pour away the dregs of coffee and flat champagne, and let in the clean night air, and the uniformed musicians would put the loud, brazen horns and saxophones into their cases and go silently away with them through the dark streets, and all the little girls would slide out of their crushed, perspiration-streaked slips of beaded pink and orchid and gold and silver, and kick their flashing metal slippers

aside, and plunge their dyed heads and painted faces into mountains of tiny embroidered pillows, and so go off to sleep.

And to-morrow night the same waiters, the same musicians, the same group of the "season's buds," would go through the whole performance all over again!

"Listen, Maggie, you can't keep this up. Sooner or later you'll have to make it up with me and tell me what the trouble is, so why not now?" Joe pleaded.

He had made three previous overtures to a pale and unresponsive and haughty Maggie; it was late afternoon now, and he could bear neither her obvious suffering nor his own discomfort any longer.

She was in the hardware department, standing at the boxed counter where nails and bolts and nuts of all sizes were ranged in rows and rows of small compartments. The stock had become mixed, shoppers having distributed the small articles here and there at random; staples were looming large among the glassheaded tacks, coils of copper wire and spools of steel wire were mingled hopelessly together.

From this puzzle, Maggie was attempting to bring forth some sort of order again, picking up a long nail, running her eye along the little compartments, laying it with its fellows, and removing from their midst at the same time several foreign matters—balls of twine and picture hooks and door bolts.

Her figure looked small and pathetic in its shabby black, her little head, with the bright hair wound and packed severely about it, drooped forlornly. But when she heard Joe's voice, close beside her, she brought her proud little chin up with a jerk, her cheeks crimsoned, and her tone was cutting, if a trifle shaky, as she said:

"You broke my heart, that's all. But it doesn't matter. Please get out of my way.—I am not a saleswoman, madam, but I can get you one. Lucille, will you please?—thanks. Those'd be on the other side, anyway—two

counters over, madam."

Joe was honestly staggered.

"How, in the name of St. Pete, did I break your heart?"

"Never you mind now. Excuse me, you're

standing right in front—thanks, and give me those house numbers. Thanks."

"Maggie, please tell me. I give you my word—I give you my solemn word—"

"We'll not—" she was being magnificent—"we'll not discuss it," she said. Her hands flashed along the counter, her eyes were averted.

"We will discuss it," said Joe. "I haven't done anything, and I object to your acting this way!"

"Oh, no—no!" she said, in a low, trembling voice shaken with anger. "Oh, no. You didn't take Paula Younger to lunch, and pay for her lunch, at our place—at our place!—and then walk with her, and stroll around the streets with her, and have all those horrible girls at the lampshades making fun of me, and saying that Paula had gotten you away from me."

Her breast heaved; she sniffled childishly, gulped, and continued her work with a rapidity amounting almost to violence.

Joe could not stop to think of the significance or of the possible result of his answering seriously what she was saying. He only knew that he could not have her, so small, so despairing, so devoted, suffer in this way. He began to argue, in a low tone:

"Now, listen, Maggie—that's utterly ridiculous. In the first place, I went in, alone, alone—to have my lunch at the Old South Tea Room—"

"Where you and I had said we'd go some day when we were flush!" she interpolated bitterly, breathlessly.

"I forgot that," Joe said, after a second,

abashed.

"I didn't!" she said hotly, unmollified.

"Well, anyway, I'm sorry I forgot that we had a plan about the place," Joe began again, "but I swear to you I went in there with no more idea that Miss Younger was lunching there than you had! I saw her at an empty table—the place was packed, and, naturally, I sat with her."

"Oh, naturally!" Maggie said, trembling, beside herself.

"Well, would you have me cut the girl?" Joe asked, warming in his turn. "I sat with her, and later I paid the tip, twenty-five cents, and our bill for two sixty-cent lunches. There!

If I'd known that you expected me to ask permission——"

"Well, I didn't expect you to make me ridiculous and take another girl to the place you said you'd take me, and have them all laughing at me!" she began like a whirlwind, but in a low, restrained voice. "Paula Younger—I hate her, I hope she breaks her leg! Smiling all over, of course, why shouldn't she smile! She says, 'Who do you think took me to lunch to-day, Maggie?'"

"Took her to lunch—ha!" Joe ejaculated. "That's good."

"Well, maybe she didn't say quite that. Maybe she said: 'Who do you think I lunched with?' And then she says, 'We walked in to Broad Street to get my sister's skirt that she had picotted!' she says. 'It was your friend Joe Grant, Maggie, and isn't he nice when you get to know him?' she says."

"Well, I'm glad she liked me," Joe said complacently. His first spurt of anger had cooled into resentment.

Maggie made a strange sound of rage and grief and pushed the little cardboard flaps of tack boxes into place with shaking fingers.

"I'll never," she gritted between her teeth, "I'll never speak to you again!"

Joe went away, just as the scandalized saleswoman at that particular counter leaned over to say urgently: "Maggie, you can't pull that kind of stuff right here in the aisle. Smith's watchin' you, dearie."

"Smith can go to—Hyde Street!" Maggie muttered. She had finished her task now, the hardware counter was in order, and her small hands were dirty and torn and stained from the nails and oils and dust. She went down to the girls' washroom that smelled of face powder and damp plaster and a strong, wintergreen-scented disinfectant, and washed her hands and, after awhile, her tear-swollen eyes in cold water and wiped them on the soggy lengths of the exhausted roller towel.

"For to be wroth with one we love doth work like madness in the brain." Maggie had never heard the line, but she knew that she was close to madness in the hour that followed. Her face burned, her hands were icy, her confused mind was only a blur, and her heart one heavy, unendurable ache. She could not live, she could not live this way, with Joe some-

where else in this same store, Joe's dark eyes turned away from her, Joe's electrifying voice speaking to other persons, Joe's handsome face quiet and stern.

Four o'clock, and in an hour or two they would separate, for all the long night, and all Sunday, and until Monday at nine. And by that time he might have made up his mind never—never to speak to her again, as long as they both lived!

It had been pretty bold of her to question him, to rebuke him about Paula Younger. After all, it was Joe's affair. He certainly would give Maggie Johnson what she miserably characterized as "the gate," if she assumed these proprietary airs with him!

Her thoughts burned, stung, writhed together. The one unbearable thought was that the half-past five o'clock whistle would sound, and Murphy begin to close the big jointed iron grills against the world, and that she would have to go home—what else could she do?—heartbroken and alone, and bear the week-end with Joe "mad" at her.

CHAPTER XII

ER feet impelled by some actuating impulse far stronger than herself, she presently found herself in his neighbourhood. Joe was no longer a mere stock boy. He had been only ten weeks in the Mack, but he had already been elevated to the offices, which were placed in a position of some dignity and seclusion, on a mezzanine deck at the far rear of the store.

Sometimes, when a customer brought in a defective article, Maggie had to guide her upstairs to the window marked "Complaints," and once or twice other errands had taken her to the offices. But she had no excuse to-day.

She turned the knob of the glass door rather timidly, peeped within at a long line of heads bent over typewriters, and saw Joe standing at the window in the back of the room, with Simmonds, who was a buyer, both intent upon the inspection of some sort of material that Simmonds was stretching and rumpling on bloodless old fingers.

"What is it?" Simmonds asked sharply.

"Excuse me," Maggie faltered, "but is Miss Pope up here?"

Simmonds came toward her. And Joe—as she saw with a sinking heart—casually turned away and began to study a bloated, bursting book of "swatches." It was dim in the office, in the late wintry afternoon; over some of the working clerks, lights hung in clear green cones; the rest was confusion and duskiness and weary disorder, after the long day. Wire trays of papers, desks littered with sponges and pens and paste pots, green telephone cords tangled among scissors and ink bottles—it all blurred together before Maggie's tired and discouraged vision, and she felt her throat thicken and her eyes prick.

"Was Miss Pope up here?" Simmonds

"I thought—she might be."

"Maybe she's in the advertising department? Joe," said Simmonds, "did you see Miss Pope when you were in the advertising department?" standing, Stella," Maggie answered. And then, in a rush, "Oh, Stell, I had a fight with Joe."

"Oh, for gawsake," Stella said, instantly interested. "Those'd be at the notions two aisles over, madam," she interpolated smoothly, without punctuation, to a customer, before adding, "What about?"

"You'd oughter look out, Maggie," Stella said maternally. "You're on'y a little girl, reelly, and there's quite a few of the girls has took quite a fancy to Joe."

"I know," Maggie said meekly, desolately. "You know they say Joe's going to get a

raise. Simmonds has him up in the mail order all the time."

"I know." Oh, who was she that she should aspire to Joe!

She was standing at an angle of the jewellery counter that was placed in a sort of niche between columns, and that afforded her and her tangle of chains some little protection from the current of buyers. Her back was toward the store, a counter light, provided for the customers' better examination of fifteencent rings and ten-cent bracelets, sent a flood of light over her busy hands. But her bent aureole of chestnut braids was in shadow.

Suddenly she knew that a tall, lean man was lounging on the counter beside her, his shoulder almost touching her own. Maggie dared not look at him, but her hands shook, and happiness—wild, irrational joy!—rose up like a tangible flame in her heart.

"Still mad at me?" It was Joe's voice. That husky, half-laughing, all-authoritative voice, with that hint of superiority and condescension and tolerance and affection in it that set all her senses on fire. He put a brown, familiar hand, strong and lean and fine, like himself, over one of her hands, and she stopped working and stood still.

"Joe——" Her voice wouldn't come. It was only a hoarse little caw. "Joe, don't be mean to me," she said in a low tone, holding her words steady, not raising her eyes.

An endless—endless silence. Was it a full half second? Then he said, in a tone from which assurance and banter had alike departed.

"Was I mean to you, Maggie?"

For a minute she did not answer. Then he saw a tear fall on the hand she stirred restlessly among the chains, and she put her head up and faced him bravely through wet eyelashes and managed a smile.

"Of course—of course you're not, Joe! It's just that I'm—I'm an idiot! It's none of my business who you lunch with—and I'm sorry

I-blew up."

"It is your business, if you care, Maggie," he said, nicely, kindly, even a little gruffly, surprised to find neither his voice nor his emotions entirely under his control, and speaking a little gruffly.

"But I'm going," she said resolutely,

quietly, "not to care."

Joe experienced a queer little twinge of pain. She looked so small, so weary, so exquisitely pretty in this soft light, and she was such a loving little thing!

"I'm glad we're friends again," he said

awkwardly.

"Yes, I am, too."

"What are those—lockets?"

"Stell got 'em all mixed up. I'm just about done with them."

She raised a hand frankly, swept away tears, sniffed childishly, and heaving one long sigh of relief, set to work again. Joe stood a minute studying the peachy curve of her cheek, and the sweep of the long lashes that were stuck together with tiny beads of moisture.

"Glad we're friends?"

"Oh—" there was no coquetry left in her; her tone was one of exhausted thankfulness—"I couldn't of stood it," she confessed.

The store was almost empty now, and some of the front lights had been extinguished. Girls at various counters were busy with lengths of enveloping silesia.

"What you doing to-morrow, Maggie?"

Lilacs drenched with dew—a spring moon—a garden filled with velvet shadows—nightingales—here in the five-and-ten!

"Nothing, I guess."

"Would you let me come and take you out to a picture, and maybe we could have tea afterward?"

"I guess I could." Her voice was brimming with bliss. "Sodas, you mean, or supper?"

Social tea was evidently an unfamiliar meal to Maggie. But he hadn't meant supper—in-

deed, he hadn't meant any of it. He was doing, saying, inexplicably, exactly what he didn't intend to say. He had already indicated to her that she did have some shadowy sort of right to resent his taking another girl to lunch, and now here he was making an engagement with her for to-morrow!

"Oh, supper I ought to be home with my mother."

"That's what I thought."

"But we could have lunch somewhere."

"Dinner? I have to help get it, at home. But we'll have sodas again, Joe, like we did before."

So that was a definite engagement, and Joe, wondering what had come over him, was free to go home. The other employees of the Mack were already streaming through the side door.

But when Maggie, her cheeks roses, her feet fairly dancing, came flying up from the locker room, with her hat and coat on, Joe was lingering at the top of the stairs.

"I thought I'd walk with you to the corner."
"Oh, that's grand! Which way do you go,
Toe?"

"Down past the city—out on the Elming-dale road."

"Then you want the Ten car." His arm was under her elbow, and she gave him once more the delicious sensation of nearness, confidence, and sweet smallness and youth.

Joe, as they went along under the street lights, looked down at her affectionately.

"All right again, huh, Maggie?"

"Oh, Joe!"

"I felt so badly about it!" the man said.

"You didn't feel anything like the way I felt!" Maggie answered, fervently.

"I wouldn't hurt your feelings for anything in the world, you know that," Joe said, in his kind, big-brother voice.

"I was crazy, I guess. It's none of my business whose lunch you pay for," Maggie said, in a very luxury of humility and repentance.

"No, but I can see the way it struck you," said Joe.

"It made me cry," she said simply, blinking fresh moisture from her lashes with her pathetic little echo of a laugh.

"You poor idiot. As if you hadn't real things enough to cry about!"

"But it's all right now!" She looked up, and her sapphire blue eyes shone through the mist of tears, and the red mouth that smiled at him was trembling a little, too.

"Just the same, you look tired," Joe said

disapprovingly.

"Well," she was all laughter again, "I had a fight with a friend of mine!" she told him.

"I see. Why don't you make it up?"

"I have made it up."

"Ah! And do you like him as much as ever?"

"Who?" She hunched her little shoulder companionably against his.

"This friend—you quarrelled with."

"No, not as much. But more!"

"If I have to speak to you once more about flirting with the employees, Miss Johnson, it'll be the gate for yours! Here, behave yourself!" said Joe, for, with both hands locked loosely about his arm, she had suddenly arrested his progress by jumping up and down, once or twice, in sheer ecstasy.

"Lissen, Joe, you oughter buy me that cake in that winder!"

"Is there a winder there too? How nice! I see a window——"

"Oh, shut up!" He had never seen her so deliciously pretty, so small and loving and enchanting. She could hardly keep her little feet on the ground. Tired? Depressed? Hungry? Not when Joe Grant, tall and lean and protective and most appreciative, was beside her, was guiding her along the lighted street.

"Perhaps you'll tell me some time why I should buy you a forty-cent cake, Margaret?"

Another jump of joy beside him. But no answer in words.

"I'm blowing you to a show to-morrow; isn't that enough? You're a gold-digger."

"I am not. But to-morrow's my birthday. Honest it is. I'll be eighteen! I'll be of age," Maggie chattered on. "Eighteen years old, and still an old maid. Valentine's Day, too—you're going to send me a valentine, I hope? I used to send everyone awful valentines—I sent my teacher one once with an awful bonnet on, and pimples on her nose with hairs coming out of them—she was awfully pretty, too. One year, when I was fourteen, I had nineteen val-

entines, and I didn't send myself one, either. All the boys in school sent me valentines."

Her walk was a combination of jump, bounce, and dance step. Joe had to laugh sympathetically at the laughing face, the eager eyes that demanded his sympathy.

"And to-morrow's really your birthday?"

"Uh-huh. I'll be eighteen. Isn't this fun, Joe, going 'round together? I wish I didn't have to go home! I can Charleston, Joe—a little. Sort of this way——"

"Here, behave yourself, girl! There are po-

"Wouldn't it be awful, Joe, really to be arrested?"

"I've been arrested."

"Oh, Joe Grant-you have not!"

"I have, I tell you."

"What for?" Maggie was tense with indignation.

"Speeding. A fellow and I got hold of a car..."

It had been his own roadster, charging about New Haven's streets at the rate of about seventy miles an hour. Dud Wheeler and him-

self had wired their respective fathers for bail, he remembered.

"Oh, well." She could forgive speeding. "The boy that lives next door is Irish, and him and another boy were arrested once for breaking the peace, they got two dozen giant crackers on the Fourth last year," Maggie volunteered. "They were afraid to use them in the daytime, so they waited until two o'clock in the morning, and then they went over to Courtlandt Avenue and fired them off, and there was more yelling and hollering—all the winders up! And the police came and ran the boys in.

"But his mother went up to court the next day," she observed, "and told that cop where he got off at, and the Judge, too, and his grammer talked to them, too."

"God help them!" Joe said simply.

Maggie indulged in a giddy burst of laughter.

"This is my corner, Joe."

His steps had been quite automatically turned toward that particular quiet block where he had parked his roadster. They were close to the handsome, low-slung car now, with its glittering plate glass and pool-black enamel, and its smart pipings of red.

"Here's some feller left his roadster here,"

Joe said.

"You'd wonder he'd have any business in this neighbourhood," the girl innocently commented.

"How far away do you live, Maggie?"

"Oh, not so far. Pop and I walk it every morning. 'Bout—I think it's thirteen blocks."

Joe had palmed his key.

"Want me to run you home in this car?"

"I get so sick of my automobile, it's a treat to me to walk!" Maggie assured him. But she was a trifle puzzled by the sudden intensity in his manner, and horrified when he slipped into the machine, slid his long lean body into place under the wheel, and challenged her cheerfully.

"Come on—let me run you home! I'll have it back here before he wants it!"

"Joe Grant, get out of that car! D'you want to be sent to jail?"

"Oh, come on, get in, Maggie—don't be so scary. It won't take five minutes!"

"But, Joe, isn't it locked?"

"Nope. Key right here! Get in, Maggie, and—listen! I'll bring it back to the other end of the block and let him hunt for it awhile, to teach him a lesson about forgetting to lock it!"

The street was very quiet in the darkness of the dinner hour. Maggie took a hesitating step toward the car, shook her head, and drew back.

"Joe, you could be sent to jail for that!"

"Oh, come on—it won't take five minutes!"

In the end, she yielded, with a little rush of excited laughter, and settled her small form luxuriously in the front seat beside him, little feet planted comfortably on the sloping board that carried them almost to the level of her nose.

"Some car!" Joe said.

"Oh, it's like flying!"

"You wouldn't let me run you out to the beach?"

"Oh, no!" she said, instantly sobered. "It don't take much to have a girl get herself talked about," she reminded him.

Joe laughed.

"Maggie, how'd you like to own a car like this, and have a big, fluffy white fur coat, and be riding along here this way—down to Elmingdale, or the Westbeach Arms, or one of those fashionable places?"

She made a little settling, birdlike motion of her head, as if she settled, in imagination, into luxurious furs, and he heard her sigh.

"Joe, b'leeve me, I've seen girls do both

ways, and there's nothing in that!"

"Nothing in what?" he asked, surprised.

"In—well, in letting fellers buy you coats and take you out riding. You don't mind being poor, do you, Joe?" she asked anxiously.

"Don't you?"

"I?" There was a ring of genuine amazement in her voice. "Why, but what else would I be?" she demanded blankly.

"Don't you ever think of yourself as rich, with beautiful clothes, and a maid, and a big, comfortable room?" He glanced sideways.

"I think of myself as straight," she said briefly, unencouragingly.

"Of course," Joe murmured, struck.

"Anyway, my father—my mother—they wouldn't——" She was stumbling; he saw

that she felt that they could not rise to these dizzying heights. "We're pretty near living the ideel life now," she said, brightening, after a thoughtful moment. "And my father says that all day long he thinks about—our house, and how nice and shady and quiet the kitchen is, and all the new dish towels—Did I say 'ideel' or 'ide-al' then?" she asked, suddenly interrupting herself.

He cleared his throat.

"I didn't notice."

"Then I guess I said it right," she said, with a sigh of relief. "No, I wouldn't want to be rich, Joe, all of a sudden," she went on. "I wouldn't want my folks ever to—to think anyone was laughing at them. We're getting out of debt, and even Liz—even Liz was real nice about the ide-al life the other day, and she said we ought to get out of the cottage and move into a nice apartment," Maggie went on, with some little difficulty; "she said it was some comfort to come home to our house now—and she s-s-said—Liz said—that s-s-she—"

"Maggie! For heaven's sake! What are you crying about?"

The little figure beside him turned toward him, and rested against his overcoat sleeve, and she caught at it with both hands, halfburying her wet face there.

"Be-because—because they said I did it, Joe! Even Ma said that I made them all comfortabler—and happier—and it—it makes me

cry to have them love me so!"

He abruptly ran the car into the curb, and stopped it there, and put his arms about her, and tipped up her face. And when, by the light of a street lamp, he saw the streaks of bright tears upon it, and the red mouth trembling, and the long lashes stuck together into black points, like those of a whimpering baby, he put a quick kiss on the tip of her straight little nose, and said, in a voice that was itself a little husky and broken, in spite of the brief laugh that broke it:

"Now, look here, stop it. Stop this bawling right away, or you'll have me crying, too, and I'll drive into a cop and be sent to jail!"

His big arm held her tightly, jammed against him, and her bewildered, ecstatic, tear-stained little rosy face was close to his own.

"J-J-Joe Grant!" she said breathlessly.

"Maggie Johnson! You've known this was coming, haven't you?"

"J-Joe Grant!"

"Surprised?"

A panting silence. Then she said:

"No — but — but — I guess — maybe I thought——"

"Go on. Don't stop. Maybe you thought what?"

She laughed daringly, lowered her eyes, brought their sapphire, liquid light shyly to his again. And she gave a contented little wriggle under the iron grip that held her.

"I kinder thought-maybe-it was all on

my side, Joe."

"I don't hear you. You've got to quit that murmuring into my coat lapel if you want me to get you."

A flash of laughter and daring again. But her voice was hardly audible when she said:

"I knew I—had it, Joe. But I thought you were kinder—kidding me along."

It was at this juncture that for a terrible moment Joe Grant disappeared from his own consciousness for a few seconds, and the Joseph Merrill who was a truant from college, who belonged to the same world as this smart roadster, the world of night clubs and college, the world of Elmingdale and luxury and warmth and brightness, races, polo, yachting, and trips to Europe, took his place.

Joe Grant was lean, shabby, tired, grimy, honestly interested in the problems of the particular Mack store in which he was employed, and flirting with one of the Mack stockroom girls. But Joseph Merrill had no place in this girl's life, and she could never have one in his.

The metamorphosis dizzied him for a second, and he had a disconcerting realization of what he was doing. To play a part was all very well insomuch as it concerned only himself. But here was this bewildering little madcap armful of passionately earnest femininity in his arms, her tear-soaked lashes almost touching his cheek, her whole being only too obviously ready to yield itself to his guardianship forever.

How on earth was he going to get out of this with Maggie Johnson?

When he spoke, his tone and manner had subtly altered. He must keep them cool, he

must break this thing up, now—instantly—without compunction. However hard it was, every minute of this sort of weakness would make it infinitely worse.

"You're too much of a kid, yourself, to get mixed up in love affairs! But as a matter of fact I wasn't kidding you, even for a minute— I like you, right down to the ground, and some day—when you're a real old lady, twenty or twenty-two, I'm going to put a—a business proposition up to you! So begin to get ready for it."

He had spoken affectionately, banteringly, but he could instantly see that she was deadly hurt. She drew herself up, fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief, wiped her eyes quite openly, and said, in a composed, cold voice:

"You must drive me home, Joe. My father and mother'll be wild if I'm late."

Joe, illogically and most unexpectedly, felt a pang of chill quite as definite as her own.

"Maggie—listen. Don't take that tone! You know how much I like you—I've got to stop this, I've got to stop this, I'm a fool if I don't stop this," he added, in his heart. "Why,

you're not eighteen—you're a little girl!" he added, aloud, trying to get her to smile.

"I'm eighteen to-morrow, and I'm not a little girl at all," she said, with swift dignity.

"Eighteen! Why, what would your father think if you married at eighteen!" Joe protested. "Damn it—and damn me for a fool!" he ejaculated interiorly, aghast to hear his own words, as they came forth. "Now I've said it! This is the first time that word has come into our conversations, and I'm the one that introduced it."

Maggie wiped her nose firmly, put away her handkerchief, cleared her throat.

"I've had a great deal of responsibility in my life, and there is nothing so developing to the character as responsibility," she began, quoting ideal leaflets, newspaper articles, movie captions, and night-school lessons in a bewildering jumble, as was her custom when stirred. "Since I was ten years old, I've been tryin' to earn a little an' spend a little less, to bear wrongs patiently and to pray for the livin' and the dead—that's in the Catechism. I've been welcomin' rebuffs, and—just lately, I've been tryin' to live the ide-al life, and in

many ways I've succeeded at it—partly because Pop says he's always been anxious to live the ide-al life, too, but he never thought it could be done on a postman's salary."

"Listen, Maggie. Listen, darling-"

She would not even pause to catch her breath.

"Since Christmas," she went on, "it's been you, Joe. Everything I done—everything I've done," she corrected it, "has been done because I was thinkin' of you. Dishes, dust, and the way I looked and spoke, and the way I answered Liz back-except the time I told you about when she went off one Saturday night with Chess Rivers who doesn't mean any good by her, and they came back Sunday morning at three o'clock, and Chess was singin' 'Silver Threads Among the Gold'-or, no, I think he was singin' 'There's a Long, Long Road a-Winding,' but it don't matter, anyway, he was singin'-and the Mahoneys had sickness next door-I'm lettin' all my 'g's' go, Joe, and I know it, but the reason is that I'm talkin' too fast---"

He caught her small agitated hands and

held them tightly, as he might have held a baby's hands.

"Maggie, just be quiet, dear. There's no need for you to get so excited and upset. Listen, dear. I like you immensely. I think you have more character than any girl I ever knew. I wouldn't give up your friendship for anything in the world. But you're only a little girl, Maggie, you're going to have a dozen beaus before you pick out the man you want to marry." He winced interiorly. There was the big word again! He appeared to be inspired to say exactly what he didn't want to say on this fatal February afternoon. "I hope our friendship—"

She was quivering in his firm hold like a small, frightened bird. And when she spoke her voice was dry, and shaken, and breathless.

"I know, Joe. I know. That's you. That's your side of it. But I was talkin' about me."

He looked down at her. The handsome sullen face he had worn a few short months ago was very tender, very affectionate, in spite of his desperate, whimsical amusement and puzzlement now, and his voice held real feeling, as well as a sort of good-natured teasing indulgence, as he said:

"And I don't please you—I don't satisfy you—as a friend, you little cave woman?"

She caught at his lapel with a small bare hand, and raised her beautiful, wistful, childish eyes.

"Not-now," she whispered.

He laughed suddenly, boyishly. But there was a stinging moisture in his own eyes, and a dry tightening in his throat.

"Ah, Maggie! You little idiot!"

And this kiss was a different kiss. The little figure rested against his breast, the little hand was crushed against his heart, and the fragrant soul of her seemed to be drawn through her fresh, half-opened lips.

Then they talked, Maggie's hand locked in his, her head resting luxuriously against his shoulder.

"I'm getting thirty-five a week, Mary Margaret. And I'm not going to have my wife work!"

"Oh, Joe-I'll die-"

"What's the excitement? Why these gasps now?"

"To hear you say 'my wife'!"

"That's about—one forty a month."

"And there's a budget for two people begins on eight hundred a year!" Her voice was rich with triumph. "Joe, I'm going to work it all out. We're going to put money in the bank from the very first minute. The man who has an income of one thousand and saves ten dollars is ten dollars richer than the man on an income of twenty thousand who saves nothing a year."

"Where'd you get that?"

"That was on a card in the window of the bank next door to the Mack. I see a lot of those things," added Maggie dreamily. "But I never really thought about them until I met you. You see, my mother and Liz aren't much on ide-als, and my father—I guess," she added delicately, with some hesitation, "is sorter influenced by Ma. But you—you seemed to be mine, Joe, from the start!" concluded Maggie, with a little laugh of triumph, and a little jerk of her person that brought her shoulder even more closely against his. "Joe," she resumed animatedly, as Joe, happy, touched, worried, puzzled, said

nothing, "we could have—say, three rooms, over in some street like Capp or Hill, you know—nice, but cheap, a little gas stove—we could paint the table and the kitchen chairs blue, and stencil those roses from the art department on to them, couldn't we? It'd be fun! And Joe, I'd run all over the neighbourhood getting fish and vegetables, you know, and everything that was on sale, and I'd cook you the best meals you ever ate, every man you know would say that your wife was the best cook you ever saw, and we'd walk over to the beach on Sundays and talk about the ide-al life. And I'd be Mrs. Joseph Grant."

Her pride, her joy as she said it, brought the tears to his eyes. He did not speak.

"And then we might have children, you know, Joe. I'd like two boys and two girls, wouldn't you, Joe? Because of Christmases and birthdays and things. Imagine you and me, Joe, with one of those fat, serious babies, in a white cape and cap," Maggie, looking babyish and serious herself, went on eagerly, "wouldn't he be fun!"

He was not hearing her, although his gravely smiling look was upon her face. Her

ardour, her earnestness, and his own complete absorption in the part he had been playing for so many weeks, had enveloped him. For the moment he was Joe Grant, he had never been anything else; Joe Merrill, with his car and his income and his magnificent home, was the dream. This was the reality.

The reality of a girl's love for her man. The reality of sacrifice, and service, of joy and simplicity, of enchanting poverty and blessed obscurity. And the miraculous reality of parenthood.

He interrupted her, kissing her gravely. And then, without speaking himself, although Maggie continued to chatter joyously, he drove her home, and watched the little figure fly up the shabby path with feet winged with fire.

CHAPTER XIII

OE went to his own home, and dressed for dinner like a man in a dream. Sometimes he was conscious that his breath was coming quickly, sometimes he bit his lip and stood still, with eyes abstractedly staring into space.

A week ago at this time, even yesterday at this time, he could have gotten out. Now he couldn't get out.

A week ago, or yesterday, he might have gotten out. Then—then he might simply have disappeared from the Mack, taken his place again in his own world—his father had long ago forgiven him, indeed, he was what he himself described as "ace high with the old man." He could have told Maggie that he had got a better job, promised to see her soon—might actually have gone to see her once or twice, and so tapered the affair off to nothingness, as thousands of such affairs must lessen and disappear.

But now it was different. He had kissed her,

had his arms about her, spoken of her as his wife. In her ardent, loving little soul the dream of wifehood, of a kitchen and a nursery, had taken deep root. She wasn't afraid of poverty or humble beginnings and sacrifices and service.

Maggie. Maggie Johnson. Living in that wreck of a cottage on Goat Hill, pacifying and caring for that appalling mother, that commonplace, selfish sister, and that poor little worm of a letter-carrying father.

"My God! What have I done?" said Joe

Grant, half aloud.

"What thinking of, Son?" his father asked,

looking up.

They were in the library, he and his father alone together. Dinner must have happened, for the clock on the mantel said nine. Joe vaguely remembered dinner, his mother magnificent in satin and sequins and emeralds, his father as usual rather silent, himself utterly absorbed in uncomfortable thoughts, and someone else there, some man who was to take Mother to something afterward. He remembered that she had said, "Now, don't be too long following us—there's a duck, Joe—you'll

only have to stay an hour—" so it was probably one of those vulgar, costly, gorging and drinking and smoking and flirting and screaming crushes by which another blossom of girlhood was presented to the social world.

The mother, the grandmother, the girl herself would be painted like dolls, half-naked, half-intoxicated, suffocated with the heat of the big ballroom, bewildered by noise and voices, and all the other women would be half-covered, perfumed, spangled, painted, curled as well. Joe remembered a certain impatience, deep in his soul, that anyone should attempt to draw him to-night from his wretched happy absorption in the thought of Maggie, and that he had said vaguely, "Dad and I'll be over. I sent her fifty dollars' worth of flowers, and the mother something—I forget what—a vase, I think."

Now they were alone. And to his father's surprised question, Joe could only make the son's usual answer.

"Nothing."

Then there was another short silence, after which Joe roused himself to say with perfunctory politeness:

"Nothing doing to-night, Dad?"

"I may go over to Maxwells' later—they're sitting in a little game. But I expected a couple of telephone calls to-night, and I was waiting for them," his father answered, with an awkward little effort to appear interested and cordial that touched Joe. "Brewer, one of our buyers, was to go to Japan for us on the 'Allegria next Saturday," he explained. "And now I understand that the wife's father has died and left them a pot of money—something like that—and they're going to New York," he said.

"Losing him, huh?"

George Merrill's look was one of positive pleasure. To have his boy really responsive—

"I guess so. They come and go, of course."

"Well, with three hundred and forty employees, that's natural enough," Joe drawled.

George Merrill straightened himself slightly in his big leather chair, caught at the eyeglasses that were dangling on a black ribbon, and glanced sharply at his son.

"You've got 'em counted, eh?"

"Well, the six stores—and the administra-

tion office—what have you got down there? Seventeen or eighteen clerks?"

"About that, Joe," his father said, still staring. He let the eyeglasses fall slowly, poured himself more black coffee, and sipped it, looking over his cup at his son.

Joe looked at the fire.

"Look here," his father said suddenly. "What are you getting paid in this job of yours?"

"Thirty-five a week."

"Thirty-five a week! Is that so!" George Merrill murmured, impressed. "Is that so? What d'ye do, Joe?"

"Oh—stock, and lately I've been handling freight invoices, and working with the boys on percentages. There was a sort of leakage somewhere, and we segregated the various

appropriations."

"You wouldn't ever be interested in coming down to one of the Stores with me, Joe," his father began, a little gruffly, a little timidly. "It might interest you very much. Your mother has always been bitterly opposed to your going into the Stores. But—it might be a beginning."

"No, thanks," Joe said then lightly. "I couldn't start in the Stores-now."

His father nodded. The sudden interest and hope that had lighted his face faded. He instantly resumed his usual inscrutable, remote expression again.

Joe laughed gruffly, cleared his throat.

"That's where I am, Dad," he explained. The words sounded oddly flat, somehow. "I've been in the Eighth Street store for nearly three months-since before Christmas," Joe stumbled on. "I've been promoted twice and had a raise!"

George Merrill stared for a long minute at his son.

"You-!" he presently said, in a low, sharp tone.

"Sure," Joe said easily, grinning.

"Was that your job?" the older man asked

"That was my job."

Still his father looked at him keenly, only half believing it. And then suddenly a smile that rarely was seen there in these days lighted his face, and he settled back in his leather chair, the tips of his ten fingers spread and



A United Artists Production My Best Girl
"WE AIN'T GOIN' TO HEAR NO MORE OF NIGHT-COURTS IN THIS
FAMILY1"



touching each other, his quizzical, puzzled, proud eyes on his son.

"My boy. How did that happen?"

"Oh, well—you remember the blow-up in December, when you sent for me to come home from college about some bills? Well, the next day, I went down to get a job from Uncle Irving, and he turned me down cold, and then I went a couple of other places." Joe set his mouth grimly, was silent for a second, as if he found the words bitter in his mouth. "In the afternoon, I happened to be passing the Mack," he resumed, "and I went in; there was a sign there that said 'Extra Christmas Help Wanted.'"

"The Mack?"

"That's what they all call the Stores."

"You told them who you were?"

"No, sir. I called myself Joe Grant."

"And nobody recognized you?"

"There was no reason why anybody should. I took care that I shouldn't look much different from the rest."

There was a silence, while father and son stared into the fire. Then George Merrill said:

"This gives me more—more satisfaction, Joe, than anything that has happened in a long time. What did they pay you to start with?"

"Twenty-two and a half a week. I'm getting thirty-five now, and if they make me head of the stockroom I can ask for more."

"You're sure they don't place you, Joe?" "Place me! My God, you ought to hear what they call me and what they tell me."

The older man laughed out suddenly.

"You've gotten the goods on me, eh?"

"Not on you, exactly; but I learned about Uncle Irving and young Irv, though."

George Merrill looked startled for a moment, laughed again.

"Who put you on to that?"

"They all seem to know it. But you stand pretty high with them, Dad. That stock-buying idea has made a hit all down the line."

"Now, you interest me very much when you say that, Joe," his father said, suddenly serious and attentive. "They like that, do they?"

"The Mack giving them fifty per cent. of everything they save. Great Scott, why wouldn't they like it!" ejaculated Joe. But his father had returned to the pleasure and surprise of the revelation and was smiling into the fire.

"You in the Stores. You in the Stores, eh?" he murmured. And then thoughtfully he added: "That will be an invaluable experience to you, Joe—no matter what you do. Your mother—" he hesitated—"your mother would like you to go back to college next autumn," he offered.

Joe shook his head.

"You mean—" his father's voice was actually a little unsteady—"you mean you're not sure of it? You're not—you're not really getting anything out of the Stores, Joe?"

The boy looked up unsmilingly, there was even a little puzzlement in his voice as he answered: "Sure. I like it."

"Pretty hard work, isn't it?"

"Not so hard."

"And the sort of men—the girls there—aren't they a rather—plain—crowd?"

"They're all right."

The beaming, the almost fatuous satisfaction depicted upon his father's proud and amused face was lost upon Joe, for he was staring somewhat moodily into the fire now, his long, lean body sunk into his deep chair, his long, fine, nervous hands locked and dropped between his knees.

"This," George Merrill suddenly exclaimed, "accounts for the automat idea, of course! I wondered— and Flint wondered, how you happened to be taking such an interest in the Stores."

Joe looked up; his face and his tone when he spoke were alike dark and heavy.

"It wasn't really my idea. I got it from one of the—clerks."

"They seem to feel there's something in it—we discussed it at a general meeting a week or so ago. As a matter of fact, I think we're going to introduce it at your particular store. Our plan would be to buy that idea, Joe—for a consideration—twenty or twenty-five thousand—and have it for a feature of our own."

"Again, as a matter of fact, it wasn't my idea at all!" Joe said.

His father glanced at him. The boy's tone had been hard and bitter.

"I thought you—that night Flint was here——"

"It was a girl who suggested that," Joe said, not moving his eyes from the fire. "One of the girls in the Mack. A kid-really. She's only seventeen. She'll be eighteen tomorrow,"

His father shot him a sharp glance.

"How d'you happen to know that?"

"She told me. I took her home to-night and she happened to mention it."

A silence. Then George Merrill said slowly: "I see."

Toe laughed uncomfortably, looked up.

"See what?"

"What's been making the change in you, Joe. It was a girl, was it?"

Again the boy laughed, annoyedly, this time.

"I'm not in love with her, if that's what you mean. She's only a kid. She lives over on Washington Street, in the neighbourhood they call Goat Hill. Her father's a postman, and her sister works in the Beauty Parlour of the Cecil Hotel."

"She likes you, eh?" the older man asked, reading aright the hesitating uneasiness behind the words.

"Well, she's only a kid."

"How far've you gone, Joe?" It was a man's businesslike question to another man, and Joe's flush held a little pride in it, as well as

some very real shame.

"Oh, nothing!" he said vexedly, grinding his palms together. "I've talked to her-she's a kid who's determined to make the best of herself—goes to night school and picks up all the ideas she can lav her hands on."

"And how well do you like her?"

"I like her a lot. She's a wonderful girl."

"Pretty?"

"Yep. She's awfully pretty. She doesn't have much chance to dress, you know. There's a mother who's a sort of invalid, and this poor little rat of a father, and a sister who gives Maggie her old clothes—"

"Maggie, eh? I don't-somehow-see your mother taking a fancy to-Maggie," George Merrill said, with a faint, rueful grin.

"She won't have to. I'm not in love with her!" Joe said, with a little touch of affronted

pride.

"Your mother-and I myself, too," George Merrill said, after a moment, "have always rather hoped that you and Millicent Russell would give us a wedding, one of these days. She's a fine little girl—seems to be different from the rest."

Different from the rest in being a little more reckless, a little less self-controlled, a little actress when his father was about, Joe thought. But there was no use saying anything. The grown-ups back of his generation were determined to believe nothing wrong of it, and their children's wildest actions always found a ready defence in the older eyes.

"The trouble is," he began slowly.

"That she's in love with you," his father finished mildly, as he paused.

Joe gave an abashed, youthful laugh and shrugged.

"She thinks you are merely another clerk among all the clerks, does she?"

"She never dreams anything else! Why, today, she was talking about living on thirtyfive a week, and rents over on Capp Street."

"Hello, it's gone as far as that, has it?"

"Well, hang it," Joe said desperately, "it hadn't, until to-day."

"Engaged, Joe?"

"Well, no. And yet, yes, in a way we are. You know how girls are, Dad. I've been worrying a lot about it, this evening," Joe confessed. "And it seems to me that everything depends upon our next meeting. If I could once get through that, and kind of hold things down—let her think that there would be an engagement, some day, maybe, but keep everything indefinite now——"

"How much will you have to see her, Mon-

day?"

"Oh, not much. I'm up in the mail-order department now, most of the time. But I've got a kind of engagement to see her to-morrow—I could cut it, of course."

"She's a pretty common little thing, eh?"

"Well——" No, he couldn't say Maggie was common. Joe groped for words. "Not exactly that, Dad. But—but you see she thinks I'm like all the others—just one of the boys down there, the sort of men she would naturally marry. I've talked to her about books, and culture, and ideals—she's a glutton on ideals!—and she has sorter—" he laughed, flushed, and suddenly becoming

grave and frowning again, went on—"she has sorter a respect for me," he finished lamely.

Perhaps the shrewd eyes watching him saw more than he dreamed. Perhaps George Merrill, at forty-eight, could read the whole story! That what the boy had meant to the girl's ambition and affection had been a small thing, after all, beside the stimulating and soothing effect of her faith upon his wounded pride. This—whether he knew it or not, was what had saved him—real, living contact with a living world, and a real woman in that world.

But if he saw this, George Merrill made no sign. He merely watched his son with keen

and sympathetic eyes.

"If she knew who I was—who I am," Joe floundered on, "it might break her all up. She's no gold-digger—she wouldn't know how to marry a rich man—it'd scare her. I didn't realize that until to-day. She doesn't want to have anything to do with Joe Merrill—she's got everything set to marry Joe Grant. It'll hurt her, and it'll make her mad, to find out the truth. She'll think—I wouldn't tell her until just before we were married!

"You see, I want to get out of this without hurting Maggie!" he began again, after a silence.

"Then I wouldn't see her to-morrow, Joe."

"No." Joe threw up his head restively, as if he needed air. "No, I won't. I've made up my mind to that!" he said.

"You might tell her that you can't marry until you're making—well, say five thousand

a year," the older man suggested.

"Maggie Johnson! She never heard of five thousand a year—she'd laugh in my face. She's the kind that would cook and sweep and have a baby, I daresay, on fifteen hundred, and eat it up!"

His half-fretful, half-amused voice stopped, and he fell again into troubled thought. It was George Merrill who next

spoke.

"You're quite sure you don't want to marry this girl, Joe? Oh, I don't mean immediately—I don't mean now," he interpolated hastily, as Joe looked up in surprise. "But she could be sent to a fine school for a year or two, travel, maybe. She sounds like a good girl—might make you a fine wife. Of course, Milli-

cent Russell is a straight little girl, and she's mighty pretty and smart, and has a lot of money, too——"

"Listen, Dad, I don't want to say anything against Millicent," Joe interrupted to say firmly, almost hotly, "but beside Maggie—Mary Margaret her real name is, they've got good New England blood in their veins!—beside Maggie Millicent is a drunken little moron, just as immoral as she dares to be, a liar and a parasite and a bum—"

"Steady, my boy! Steady!" George Merrill interrupted in his turn. "Why, Joe, you must be halfway in love with this Maggie," he sug-

gested, puzzled.

"Well, I'm not," Joe responded shortly. "But she's a fine little girl, and she—she seems to be reaching out for everything that is fine, just as these other girls reach out for everything that's rotten! She doesn't know what they know—she wouldn't understand their jokes——"

"H'm!" ejaculated Merrill senior in a somewhat perplexed, dissatisfied tone. And at the time nothing more was said.

CHAPTER XIV

N Sunday morning, however, just a few minutes before twelve, George Merrill met his son in the wide, dignified upper hallway of the family mansion and noted that he was dressed for golf.

"Got out of your engagement, eh?"

"Yep. Sweeney was going into town for Mother, and I asked him to send a note to—Miss Johnson, with flowers."

The older man scraped his chin thoughtfully.

"Well-I guess you're wise!"

"I hope so!" Joe said unconvincedly, going

upon his way.

The February day was mild and open, under a blue western sky, and the turf on the fairways was fresh emerald. Little cloud shadows chased across the links, and all Joe's world strode vigorously from flag to flag, bent, thwacked, and strode on again.

He played four holes, played the fifth-

a short one, and suddenly turned back to the clubhouse. It took him fifteen minutes at the telephone to locate his mother's chauffeur.

"Sweeney. This is Joe Merrill speaking. Sweeney, did you get those flowers to that

young lady?"

"Yessir. They was ordered by half-past ten."

"You're pretty sure she'd have them by twelve?"

Joe hoped the answer would be negative. This would force him, as a gentleman, to keep his appointment with Maggie. How could Sweeney be sure?

"Oh, yessir, she'd have them before that. He said the wagon only went out once on Sundays, at one o'clock. So I had him pay a special messenger, sir. They went right out."

"Oh. Oh. I see. That was quite an idea,

Sweeney, Thanks."

And he hung up the receiver, feeling flat.

Fool! He hadn't asked the man if he had been able to get lilies of the valley. The violets and gillies and freesias were everywhere —he'd have no trouble with them. Ten dollars' worth of flowers—but Maggie would never notice the cost. She'd probably think that was about fifty cents' worth.

Her sister, 'Lizabeth, the awful girl with the voice and the dry, curled bob, might be shrewder, though. Joe wished he had thought of that. Too late now.

He could tell Maggie that his brother was in the flower business—got these things for nothing. No; he would say his chum worked in the flower shop and had worked it for him. That would do,

Poor kid! She probably had them by now. Poor little disappointed kid!

In his note he had merely said, with an effect of breathlessness, "Can't come to-day, impossible, sorry, see you to-morrow, Joe."

Damn it, it made him feel hot and uncomfortable and like a skunk.

Maggie, doing the Johnson dinner dishes, and perhaps shedding surreptitious tears into the sink.

Joe had an inspiration. The intelligent thing to do, the honest thing to do, was to go to her and say, "Now, look here, Maggie——"

"Now, look here, Maggie." He was at

home again, ripping off his golf apparel, getting into the extraordinary costume that for the young bloods of Goat Hill was the vogue on Sunday afternoons. "I've got to put my cards on the table with you, my very dear little girl——

"Look here, Maggie. You're only eighteen, and you could no more fall in love than a baby. It's darned lucky for you that you happened to pick me—because I like you so much, and I understand the situation."

Rushing cityward in his car a few minutes later, he was conscious of weakening. Perhaps calling upon her to-day, everything considered, was a distinctly unwise thing to do. A cool wind was flowing over deserted Washington Street when he reached it, and papers and grit were idly drifting along before it; the apartments in Maggie's neighbourhood looked grimy and cheap, and the Johnsons' dilapidated cottage especially forlorn.

Maggie came to the door herself, when Joe twisted the little central bell—everyone else, he discovered to his enormous relief, was out. She took him into the kitchen, an orderly,

empty apartment to-day; it was the only warm room in the dwelling.

A subdued, gentle little Maggie—he saw that she had been crying. She explained that she had burned her wrist, that was why. Joe took the wrist in his big, thin, fine fingers, and looked at it concernedly, and then up at Maggie's sober little face with the crown of gold above it, and back at the wrist again.

"Pop volunteered for special delivery today—it's Valentine's Day," Maggie said. "Liz was off with her beau, and Ma had to go to a funeral at one. So I had a real good chance to make the kitchen ideal."

"You certainly did that one little thing," Joe said admiringly.

She did not brighten. She was like a small creature broken.

"I thought some day I'd paint these chairs blue—I saw an article in the back of a magazine about blue chairs with roses on them," she continued, with a little effort, "and then, with blue curtains and some new saucepans, we'd be all fixed."

"And what did you get for your birthday, Maggie?"

"Nobody remembered it but Pop. He was talking about it while I gave him his breakfast," Maggie said lifelessly. "He told me that when I was born they didn't dare tell Ma I wasn't a boy—because of my brother that died."

"But you got my flowers?"

"Oh, yes. And thank you, Joe."

The wild wind rattled the windowpanes; and chaff stirred in the dingy little back yard, and chicken feathers blew across the empty fowl run.

There was an elementary French book on the table, a pencil and paper. She had evidently been studying. The stove was cleared, except for a simmering pot, and into the sink's immaculate cleanness a faucet occasionally dripped with a little plop.

She had expected Joe to call on her to-day. He had sent her instead a basket of expensive spring flowers and a note. And now here he was himself, as well, and still she was unresponsive and drooping. Joe was at a loss to imagine in what he had offended.

"You aren't mad at me, are you, Maggie?" he asked suddenly, and unexpectedly even to

himself, in the midst of some trivial discourse.

The magnificent eyes, between their heavy fringes, widened in surprise.

"Oh, no, Joe. Why would I be? I wouldn't have any right to be mad at you," Maggie said, adding the last phrase as if to herself.

"You seem sort of—stiff," Joe said, feeling the waters deepen, and lift him from his feet, and begin gently, irresistibly, to carry him away from land.

"Here's what it is, Joe," Maggie said. Her small hands were clasped upon the French book as she sat at the kitchen table, and the legend he had given her months ago was plainly visible on the sink shelf above her head: "The way to begin living the ideal life is—to begin." "I just happened—when I got your note—to see your side of it, Joe," resumed Maggie. "I know you like me—you don't have to tell me that. And I know you don't love me—you don't have to tell me that, either. I hope we'll always be friends. But—" she stopped short, pressing her linked fingers, with a quite unconscious eloquence, over

her heart, and not looking at the man as she spoke—"but—this part of it—isn't easy for me, Joe," she finished, in a whisper.

Joe was silent, holding himself almost vio-

lently in bonds.

"I know I seem awfully young to act like this," Maggie presently said, in a dead silence, "but—in one way—I wasn't n-n—I mean I wasn't ever young."

The man cleared his throat.

"What made you change this way—from last night, when we sat in the car and talked?" he temporized gruffly.

"I think kinder realizing that you were—saying more than you meant, Joe!" she answered simply. "And then when I saw the man coming round to the back door here with your flowers, I almost died. I knew what they were! I knew then that you weren't coming. I put my hands over my face and said, 'no—no—no!' It didn't seem to me I could bear it, Joe."

Something of the pain and shock of that terrible minute overwhelmed her again, and resting her elbow on the table, she put her hard, work-worn little hands over her eyes. "There's something I don't understand about it," she said, after a pause.

And immediately afterward, to his bewilderment, she appeared to gain complete control of herself and her emotions, and became quite—or almost quite—her usual self. She introduced to Joe the mongrel dog that was her special darling, and disappeared into some region at the rear to bring back a basket in which a cat was regally couched with two white kittens.

"We're going to keep one, and Monica O'Connor is going to have the other. Aren't they cute, Joe? They're boys. I used to think, when I was little, that all cats were girls and all dogs were boys, did you, Joe? I named that little sassy one 'Pete,' but Monica wants to name her own—she's twelve, Joe, and she's never set foot to the floor, and my mother says she doubts will Monica O'Connor ever comb gray hairs—so that there are a good many of us better off than we think we are!"

She was delicious, small, confidential, brave in her first battle with hurt and humiliation. Joe felt shamed and bewildered as he gently answered her, discussed the cats, the French lesson, the weather.

"You oughtn't to waste your money on flow-

ers like that, Joe."

"They didn't cost me anything like what you think. I have a friend who works in Baldocchi's."

"They're beautiful."

"Did you know they were thinking of trying out your automat idea for the buttons and pins and tacks and so on, Maggie?"

"Who told you that?"

"Oh, one of the higher-ups. And he told me more than that. There might be a fat little check in it for you."

"I don't believe it!" she said scoffingly. But the colour began to creep back into her cheeks.

"It's true. What would you do, Maggie, with—say, twenty thousand dollars?"

"With-with what?"

"With twenty thousand dollars for all your rights in that idea?"

"Joe, I'd sell my rights in that idea for

twenty-five cents, if you ask me!"

"Yes, but you couldn't do that. They seem to feel it's a new idea and a darned good idea, and my father—" he floundered, grew red, and saved himself by a hair—"my father thought it was a pretty good idea, too; I was talking to him about it," he said.

She had noticed nothing amiss. Her eyes

were dreamy, happy.

"Joe, do you and your father talk about things?" she asked, as if she liked the picture.

"Not much. But lately we have been, more," he answered truthfully. "No, but come back, Maggie. What'd you do if you had twenty thousand dollars?"

Her eyes were flashing, and the beautiful little face that had been so pale when he entered was shining with its loveliest radiance now.

"I'll tell you what I'd do! I'd buy one of those double houses over on River Street for my father—eighteen thousand, they cost, but, Joe, they're lovely! Two flats of five rooms, all sunny, and bath, and they rent for sixty, and at that they're always full. And then we'd live in one and rent the other, and it'd be Pop's—do you see? Nobody else would have a right to say anything about it. My father says the dream of his life is to own his own home and

have another little place to rent. He'll get his pension in eight years, and think how good he'd be fixed. Him and me—" Maggie was, as usual, being carried away by the rush of her own eloquence—"him and me have walked over there many a time on Sunday afternoons," she said. "And I'll always tell him, 'Never mind, Pop. Some day I'm going to buy you this one, with the porches, or this one, with the garage to it!"

Her blue eyes were shining with delight; there were still traces of tears about her lashes, but Joe thought he had never seen her look so lovely.

Suddenly—suddenly she was in his arms, her protestant little hands pressed against his chest, to brace herself away from him, her feet firmly planted on the floor, her amazed and bravely laughing eyes reproaching his.

"Joe-don't!"

"Maggie—let's not have any more nonsense," he said. "You belong to me. We love each other!"

Instantly the little arms went about him, tightened, the small head, with its crown of gold, was pressed, with the little loving, jerk-

ing digs of a child's head, against his heart. Joe kissed the top of her head and the rosy ear that a curving filament of gold hair left free, kissed the eyes that were flooded again with tears, and the sweet fresh mouth that was ready, now, to return his kisses. He sat down at the kitchen table in a big rocker, and Maggie curled like a weary kitten in his arms, and for a while they did not speak, Joe holding her close, his eyes grave, and staring into space; Maggie resting against him, spent and utterly at peace, her small frame shaken now and then by only a deep sigh of bliss.

Ma, returning at this point, found them in slightly more formal attitudes, but still obviously walking in Paradise. And to Ma was first announced the engagement of marriage between Mary Margaret Petheridge Johnson,

spinster, and Joseph Grant.

CHAPTER XV

"OE, ducky, could you come in here for a minute and talk to your poor old mother?"

"Always glad to oblige a failing old woman!" Joe said. But his heart sank within him.

It was the same night, the night of that Sunday when he had first sent Maggie flowers, and then followed the flowers straight to Maggie, to find her alone. It was the night of that day that had seen him making definite their engagement. Mack or no Mack, youth or no youth, they were engaged, hard and tight, now, and that was all there was to it!

Joe had come flying home from the city in the winter dusk, with his head in a whirl, confused regrets and youthful pride and thrilling happiness all churning about in his mind and heart. His father and mother would have to make the best of the situation now! And Maggie—Maggie didn't even know his real name!

He had taken the bull by the horns, with that new firmness and seriousness that had of late so amazed his father. In his mother's dressing room, before dinner, he had told them the whole story frankly.

Mrs. Merrill took the successive shocks heroically. Her son, working in one of the Stores? Joseph Merrill a stock clerk? And in love with one of the humblest of his coworkers?

"But, my darling boy, you're only twenty."
"I know it."

"And the daughter of a postman, dear. I know she may be as pretty as a rose and as good as gold, but—but she's only eighteen, Joe. What will she be at thirty—and forty?"

And again the grim, unyielding, "I know. I've thought of all that, Mother. But you

don't know-Mary Margaret."

"And she's quite ready," Mrs. Merrill mused. "Yes, I suppose she is. I suppose she feels herself quite ready to step into the position of a rich man's wife. Naturally, she would."

Joe's face burned.

"She thinks I get thirty-five a week and that we'd have to live on it. She hasn't any idea who I am!" he said hotly.

"Don't lose your temper, Joe. But I thought you told me that you drove her home in your car, yesterday?"

"I did. But she didn't know it was my car."

"Whose car did she think it was?"

"She thought I was just taking a chance—" He floundered, and his mother's handsome, beautifully painted and powdered face was stirred with a faint, incredulous smile.

"Weren't you, perhaps, just a little credulous there, Joe?" she murmured demurely. And presently she added, as he did not speak, "And college, dear. Your education isn't finished! It seems too bad to have you give up your fraternity and your friends just because Dad and I criticized you a little bit too severely last December, and you went off in a rage and got a job."

"Nope. You couldn't get me back to coll now under chloroform," Joe said, firmly, almost harshly. And his father, a somewhat silent audience to this conversation, reflected that the boy had grown ten years older in as many weeks.

All this had been before dinner. Now it was late at night, and Joe, coming in quietly from a dinner and cards with some of the members of his own set, found himself summoned to his mother's room again.

She was in bed, this time, looking beautiful in the softened light, a thin embroidered Oriental jacket partly concealing her peach silk nightgown.

"Sit down, dear. Sit here on the edge of the bed, if you like," she said comfortably, dismissing her maid with a confidential nod. "I've been thinking of your affair all evening," said his mother kindly, putting her own satiny fingers into his hard, lean young hand, "and I've had what I think is a real inspiration, Joe. Your father is all for the idea, too. This is it." She paused.

"Dad tells me that some man named Baker or Bradley was going to Japan for the firm next Saturday," she began again.

"Oh, Brewer, you mean?"

"Brewer. Fancy you knowing anything

about the business, you baby! Well, Brewer isn't going. In fact, he's leaving the Stores, I believe. What I suggested was," Mrs. Merrill went on, with deliberate pretty complacency, "that you go for the firm to Japan. Now don't interrupt me, Joe. It would mean," she continued, "a very sensible chance to wait a little, to get a new perspective on this engagement and this girl, and Dad's idea was that it would be a very easy way to break off your present relationship with the Stores."

"I'm perfectly satisfied with my present

position!"

"Don't interrupt me, Joe. The instant they all appreciate who you are, you can't go on washing windows and running elevators, or whatever it is you do."

"But why should they find out?"

"You're being rather ridiculous, dear. She—this Mary Margaret of yours, ought to know right away, in common justice to her. It's not fair to her to have this go on much longer."

He saw this-hesitated.

"Now, Joe, why not get your passports," said his mother, encouraged, "and take up

Brewer's tickets—he was going to take his wife, he has a fine stateroom, Dad says. This is Sunday; in less than six days, you'd be at sea, and have time to think all this out, and get your mind cleared about it all. Tell your Mary Margaret—" If Joe could have laughed at anything, he would have laughed at his mother's superb and instant translation of joyous, wild little Maggie into the terms of the Social Register— "Tell your Mary Margaret that you are being sent away by the firm—she's very young, she's extremely young, and if—when you come back, you both feel the same way, there'll be plenty of time to make plans then."

"I thought Brewer was going to stay down there for about eight months?"

"Well, he was, dear. But you wouldn't have to do that!"

He could not say yes to the plan, he could not quite say no. He sat scowling, feeling irritatedly that she had him at a disadvantage.

"You see, Joe," his mother's voice pursued serenely, "marriage is more than falling in love. You want to be proud of your wife, as the years go by. A girl who belongs to an en-

tirely different class of society not only makes her husband unhappy—makes him the butt of ridicule and pity for his friends, but she herself is bitterly unhappy, too. She doesn't know how to amuse herself, she has no resources . . ."

It went on for a long while. And for a long while he listened. Then she said, more lightly:

"Now run along to bed, dear. We've had enough of this for one day. But to-morrow—think it over. It's late, Joe. Get to bed quickly and go right to sleep, dear."

Joe kissed her and went off to his own rooms. He even obeyed her as far as getting to bed was concerned.

But sleep was a different matter.

Then it was Monday again, and there was a pleasant fresh bustle of girls busy in the Mack, chatting, laughing, calling to each other as they folded the long muslin covers that had protected the stock, and sharpened pencils, and prepared for the long day. The sidewalks were still drenched with water from big street-cleaning hoses, there were few taxis, and no shoppers abroad in the streets

as yet; everything seemed new and hopeful and uncrowded with the new, hopeful, and uncrowded week.

The front door and the side door of the Mack were propped wide open, and fresh damp air blew through the place that would be hot and close and jaded so soon. Joe, mounting to his exalted duties on the mezzanine floor, stopped up there for a minute and stood looking down at the confusion and activity of the store.

And presently, with an odd, sharp twist to his heart, he saw Maggie, a small figure briskly threading its way through the knots of gossiping girls and the congested aisles. Boys with pushcarts were bringing up the larger merchandise, the toys and tinware and radio supplies, and Maggie was burdened with lighter articles. Joe noted that wherever her small figure went a certain laughter and good-nature followed; girls leaned across counters to catch at her arm, and she arrested her flying feet and listened, and quick intelligence flashed into her face, and quick smiles played on her mouth.

She wore a short, snug, brief black garment this morning, but she had embellished it with a babyfied collar that spread away primly from her white, soft young throat, and, at this hour at least, the demure little organdy cuffs that matched it were crisp and fresh. Her ros, earnest little face, always so ready to break into its own peculiarly radiant expression of mirth, was framed in the aureole of her bright hair.

Joe saw her nod to a girl at the jewellery counter, saw her run off at full speed, eager to serve, saw Smith, one of the floorwalkers, halt her for a minute, and heard the man's burst of laughter, "Ha-ha-ha!" as Maggie answered his question with characteristic spirit. She was back at the jewellery counter again, and Joe could hear the thanks of the little jewellery clerk called after Maggie's again disappearing form: "You're an angel of God, Maggie Johnson!"

He had rather dreaded meeting her to-day, after yesterday. But, unexpectedly, he wanted to talk to her now—be near her, assure himself that this little willing slave of a whole

hurried scene was in a special sense his property, obedient to his mood, sensitive to his praise or dispraise.

And presently, running upstairs, she

nodded to him joyfully.

"Hello, Joe! Say, Joe——" And her smallness and sweetness and her absurd little-girl seriousness were beside him. "Joe, Smith wanted to know if you could fix it up so that we'd have a winder of them—those coloured matches! He says we haven't had any display or ads about them at all, and he's stuck with three crates of them. He told me to ast you should I bring up some cartons, and if you couldn't manage the winder, he's going to have a demonstration table right there by the Green Street door."

"Hello, Mary Margaret! How's the world with you this morning?"

"Oh, Joe, it's grand! It felt like spring when Pop and I were walking downtown this morning. I couldn't hardly keep my feet on the ground!"

"Happy, huh?"

Her glowing eyes were raised to his with an expression for which, it seemed to him suddenly, the only word was "heavenly."

"I guess I've got enough to make me happy," she said soberly.

"You aren't scared of thirty-five a week?"

"I'm not scared of anything. I wish-I

wish they would fire you, Joe!"

He looked down, tall and lean and laughing, yet shaken, too, at the eager, thrilling little being, with the flush of joy on her face, and the light that never was on land or sea in her eyes.

"Fire me!" he repeated.

"Joe—to show you how much—I like you!" she faltered. "If you came home to me some night, fired, and if we didn't have a cent—."

Tears of happiness choked her, and she blinked, and smiled, and gave herself a little shake.

Joe could not speak, his own eyes were wet. And so they stood looking at each other silently, gulping, smiling through a dazzle of tears.

"One word, Miss Johnson," Joe said then, clearing his throat. "There have been beautiful women in this world, and endearing women. But for sheer sweetness, beauty, good-

ness of heart, and beauty of mind and soul, you beat them all!—I imagine that all that yelling of 'Maggie!' below there," he interrupted himself negligently, indicating with a careless backward jerk of his head the store that was behind them and beneath them, "may mean that you are in demand. But remember that I love you more than any man ever loved any other woman since the world began. And you're going to be glad of it, Maggie, so help me God!"

He had begun in his characteristic tone of banter. But the expression in her ardent eyes as she listened shamed him into sudden seriousness, and the unexpected passion of the last words shook her to the soul and weakened the muscles of her knees, and made the palms of her hands go moist.

"Joe," she stammered, "I don't know why

you'd pick me!"

"Maggie!" The call was rising into a chorus downstairs. "Maggie Johnson! What'd you do with them all-linen monogrammed handkerchiefs? Maggie! Hustle and get me about a half box of them red hatchets and cherry trees—at the candy counter! Where's

Maggie? She went to get me—she promised—she was going—she had to bring up—Maggie!"

"I love you!" Maggie murmured chokily, almost inaudibly. And in another second she had fled down the stairs, and Joe had lost sight of her in the early morning crowd of the shop.

Serious days, these, for Joseph Grant Mackenzie Merrill. He could see his mother's point of view, he realized that he was very young, and that Maggie was even younger; that he was a gentleman, with a great name and a great fortune behind him, and that she had been heavily handicapped by birth and environment.

"I wasn't what they call a 'gentleman's son,' Joe," his father, watching him shrewdly, reminded him more than once.

For he had got into the habit of talking confidentially with his father. It meant a great relief, an outlet and safety valve, to Joe. What it meant to the older man, perhaps only George Merrill, simple, lonely, unappreciated, hungry ever since this boy's birth for his love and trust, could say.

"She loves you, does she, Joe?"

He liked the boy's uncomfortable flush. There was no smug complacency here.

"Sure she does."

"And she's straight and pretty and intelligent?"

"She's quicksilver. There's nothing she isn't. She's interested in everything—even a word, the way you pronounce something in French. She keeps biscuits in her pockets for all the horses she meets, and she can't pass a perambulator without jumping up and down and squealing."

"It would be hard for you to go to Japan next Saturday, Joe, and leave her behind?"

"Oh, no. She's only eighteen—just eighteen." Joe paused. And the shadow on his face brightened, and he laughed shortly. "It would be damned hard," he admitted frankly. "I hate to think of Mother high-hatting her, she's such a little thing!" he added, suddenly gloomy again. "And I hate to think of getting our family mixed in with her family—she fights for them like a little tiger, but they're awful people!"

"You haven't thought of marrying her and

taking her to Japan with you, Joe? You may be there six months. You might, if you liked it, spend several months out of every year there."

Joe looked at his father, and his father looked back at Joe. And there was a long, long silence in the library.

"I merely suggest it. I don't want you to miss—anything good, my boy," George Merrill said.

"Maggie's that, all right!" Joe said huskily, clearing his throat.

"In that case, we could postpone your sailing for a boat or two," his father said. "There's no special reason why you should take up Brewer's passage on Saturday. You can have ten days or a fortnight for her to get ready—no use rushing things. Then you two get away, and your mother—and your wife's family—can reconcile themselves to the idea by degrees."

"'Wife's family'!" The boy repeated the phrase in an undertone, his eyes absent, his expression dreamy. "Gosh!" he said.

"It doesn't frighten you, Joe?"

The younger man looked up, a flash in his dark eyes, the serious smile his father liked lighting his dark face.

"Not-you don't know her!-but not when

it's Maggie."

This was Thursday night. Joe took Maggie to lunch the next day, and talked to her in a way that outstripped all her wildest dreams of being really and truly and seriously engaged to be married. The firm wanted him to go "on a trip," he told her, and she must go along. She had to have her picture taken, and they'd have to be married—not to-day, but next Sunday, or Monday, or Tuesday, at latest. And after twenty-three minutes in seventh heaven, they jumped into a taxi—in itself enough to make her heart pound with a dizzying sense of utter unreality!—and went up to the City Hall, and got a marriage license.

It was all a wild blur to her. She could hardly see what her own trembling hand wrote into the blank before her, much less note that Joe, working away in silence beside her, wrote a name that was not merely Joseph Grant. He thought she looked like a bewildered, happy child in the grayness and big-

ness of the grim old building, and something twisted like a pain, deep in his heart, as she half-danced and half-jumped along beside him, and he said to himself that he would try always to be good to her. Her little fair head with the shabby little hat pulled down snugly over the rippling feathers of gold-tipped chestnut, her little heels hooked up on the chair rung as she doubled her small person over the desk, her beautiful thick lashes lowered, and her red under lip bitten in the intensity of her effort to concentrate, Mary Margaret Petheridge Johnson prepared to surrender her person and her liberty with all the delight of a child playing school.

"You see they wanted me to start tomorrow, Maggie!"

"To-morrow!" Her face paled.

"But now we're going to put it off a couple of weeks, so that you and I can combine the trip with our honeymoon."

The last magic word drowned her in April colours; she clung to his arm, as they hurried back to the Mack, the giddiest, the wildest, the happiest woman in the whole big city.

CHAPTER XVI

LL afternoon the two moved in a radiant dream: Maggie absentminded, dazed, acting and answering without the slightest consciousness of what she did or said, and Joe conscious only of deep content. It was settled now, and he was glad.

He was too excited to think, he told himself long afterward, or he could not have done what he did then. A tangle of small unexpected events arose, nothing went normally to-day, and before he knew it he had involved himself beyond extrication in the very complication of circumstances he would most have wished to avoid.

In the first place, there was to be an installation of the new automat boxes on the rear wall of the Mack, and during the following day, Saturday, the stock now sold there was to be distributed in other parts of the store. Half of the employees had therefore been requested to remain until eight o'clock

this evening, to make the change, and the other half would be expected for three hours of service on Saturday afternoon.

Maggie and Joe, both finding themselves drawn for the Friday night shift, whispered a rapturous plan for dinner together late that evening, when their work should be over, at eight. That was the second detail.

Thirdly, Joe's aristocratic mother called him to the telephone at about five o'clock. His trunk was packed—he wouldn't need much—he could get cool things in Japan—and she had sent it down to the steamer. And she and his father were coming into town to-night, to stay at the St. Paul, and see him off tomorrow, and they wanted to know if he would like anybody else invited to an informal little good-bye dinner?

"We'll dine in the Legend Room, Joe, and you youngsters can dance afterward," said his mother's polished voice. "It's just as good a way of spending the last evening as any other. It isn't such a serious separation, you know—your father and I may easily run out there and see you in Japan—and it'll mean a complete break with that odious store. Don't for-

get to say good-bye to them all, dear, because everything will be very different when you come back!"

His tone had hardened, even as his young face had set into ugly, grim lines.

"When you say 'good-bye to everyone'; you

mean to my girl, too, Mother?"

A pause. Then she had said, quite pleasantly, pleadingly—she who knew he was sailing to-morrow and whose confidence in the effects of this trip was so firm:

"My dear—I only meant that it is a separation, and things will be different when you come back, and however sweet and charming your girl, as you call her, may be, if your feelings had changed . . ."

There had been more of this. Joe had presently interrupted it unsympathetically:

"You'll be at the St. Paul, Mother?"

"Yes, dear. And we'll take a room for you there."

"Thanks. Well, I'll tell you who I'd like to bring to dinner, Mother. I'd like to bring Maggie."

There had been just a second too much of

silence. Then, in a light, strained voice, his mother had said:

"I see."

"I want you and Dad to meet her. My plans have changed slightly. I may not sail tomorrow. Anyway, I want you to meet her."

He could hear panic behind her carefully

cheerful tone.

"Certainly bring her, Joe. Under those circumstances, perhaps I'd better not ask anybody else."

Joe had seized upon this instantly:

"How do you mean 'under those circumstances'?"

But his mother had been too smart for him. "Merely, dear, that your father and I would like an opportunity to really know her a little."

"All right, then! At about eight, at the St. Paul. And have dinner ordered, will you, Mother? For we'll both be starving!"

"Joe, just one moment, dear. If you don't sail to-morrow, your father—and you've made him very happy, lately, Joe—will be absolutely and utterly disgusted——Hello!"

"Hello!" Joe said, pressing the receiver up and down shamelessly, and speaking agitatedly. "Hello—operator! You cut us off! Hello, Mother——"

"Joe!" he heard his mother's distant voice say impatiently. "Central, will you please——"

Noiselessly, gently, he hung up the receiver.

"I want you to meet my mother and father, Mary Margaret," he told her, as they toiled to and fro with crates and trays of merchandise. "They want us to have dinner with them tonight."

"Honest, Joe?" She had taken off the little black dress for these dusty operations, and was enveloped in the big mud-coloured apron again. Her small face, pale and grimy, flushed with pleasure at the news. "Will they keep it hot? We won't be out of here until almost eight, you know."

He divined that she was alluding to the dinner, and had visualized his mother as placing it back in a small oven somewhere, to await them.

"They're living at a hotel, now," he said.

"Oh, that's all right then! And say, Joe, will you 'phone my father and tell him you're taking me to dinner and that we're going to be late? And say, Joe, will you see if you can get us another of those small tables—to sort of piece out with here . . ."

She was all business again. He telephoned a few minutes later, and talked to Maggie's meek little nervous father. Maggie's father would have to ask Maggie's mother if it was all right, it appeared. Maggie's mother wanted to know where they was goin', if Mr. Grant didn't mind?

"I thought I'd take her to the St. Paul, Mr. Johnson. That's right near here."

Joe could hear a surprised little cough.

"The big hotel? Ain't that rather swell for our Maggie?"

"Not if you know how to order, Mr. Johnson. Besides, my father and mother are giving us a sort of little dinner. I'm going on a trip for the firm, you know, and this is a kind of good-bye."

Another little squawk of excitement, and

then the mild little voice again:

"Well, leave me ask her mother. I-I don't

like to do anything that Mrs. Johnson don't

approve."

Mrs. Johnson, probably dazed, did approve, however, and Joe could report to Maggie that all was serene. At a few minutes before eight, she disappeared downstairs, a dirty, dusty, drab little wearied figure, with sunny hair crushed and rumpled and hanging in a fringe over her streaked little face, and ten minutes later, by that miracle that is love and youth, she came upstairs again, looking prettier, Joe thought, than he had ever seen her before.

Her freshly washed face had emerged from soap and warm water with the firm, dewy glow of a ripe apricot; her hair was brushed into bright silky feathers and firm little gold tendrils; her organdy collar and cuffs were again stiff and immaculate. He knew that the girls had an electric iron, a gas plate, a tea-kettle, a cupboard, and everything imaginable in the line of powders and pastes and rouges downstairs, but the metamorphosis in Maggie, even considering this, was hard to believe.

"Joe, where is your father and mother's ho-

tel?" She was jumping along beside him in the dark street.

"Why, you must know, you bird-brain! It's right on the square, opposite the new bank building."

"Oh, right near the St. Paul?"

"It is the St. Paul."

She eyed him incredulously, amusedly.

"Yes, it is! Now you tell another."

Joe, within a few hundred feet now of its august doorway, felt a first prick of misgiving. What the deuce was he doing? He had only felt, up to this point, that Maggie would be thrilled with pleasure at going to the big hotel and at the revelation of his identity, startled, perhaps—but, on the whole, delighted. Now he began to wish that he had handled the matter somewhat more adroitly.

As innocently as she herself might have taken a savage from the Congo jungles into her own home, he was leading her into this. Maggie could not possibly have anticipated the African's amazement, even terror, at such commonplaces as a telephone, a glass window, a Victrola, wooden floors, hot-water faucet.

And Joe, in the same way, had not foreseen that such a hotel as the St. Paul, whose crystal chandeliers alone were as big as the whole kitchen in Maggie's house, was a world utterly unknown to her. She drew back at the lofty doorway.

"Joe, you're kidding!"

"No, I'm not, darling. This is just a restaurant, like any other, and you'll find the food isn't as good as your own cooking.—The young lady will leave her coat, too, please. Lebeau, Mr. Merrill's table, please."

They were in the hands of the bowing, obsequious headwaiter. Maggie did not hold Joe's hand, but she kept her frightened little person close in the shadow of his as they entered the warmth and intimacy and beauty of the Legend Room.

White tables, at all of which were diners, brilliant big lights far overhead, and little lights on the tables, women whose shoulders were bare and whose hair was moulded into close caps of curls, jewels and voices and perfumes and flowers and soft music—it was all a wild whirl to her stunned senses. Her shabby little shoes, her plain little gown

moved beside Joe blindly. She heard him say: "My mother, Maggie." She saw a steel-bright, handsome face looking at her under beautiful scallops of feathered hair set with a jewelled aigrette. She murmured: "Pleased to meet ju," and sank dizzily into a seat.

The room seemed to pulse about her, to go up and down in fearful waves. She could not raise her head, she could not raise her eyes. Joe knew, furiously, that everything was wrong, that he, of all persons, had been the one to betray her.

Mrs. Merrill's handsome eyes flashed with a malicious satisfaction. She had hoped, in her somewhat twisted conception of motherly loyalty, that Joe's girl would not make much of a showing to-night. But she had hardly dared hope for a conquest quite so overwhelming and immediate. The poor little thing was confounded—it was unfortunate that she seemed so gentle, so childish a creature. But even an infatuated boy of twenty must see how utterly—how pitiably out of place the child was here!

"We took the liberty of ordering, Miss Johnson," she said smoothly, "although perhaps etiquette might have hinted that we wait!"

Joe eyed his mother—shut his jaw hard. But Maggie looked up, and he saw with a sort of delighted terror that she had been angered into self-control.

"I thought you knew," she said clearly, "that I don't know anything about etiquette! Are you—" she pursued evenly, turning to Joe's father—"are you G. J. Merrill of the Stores?"

"I am, my dear," said George Merrill kindly, feeling sorry for the bewildered little thing.

Maggie grew very white and sat back slightly in her chair.

"Joe never told me—I didn't know it," she said in a lifeless little voice.

"But now that you do know it—and I ought to have told you long ago, and I'm a fool!" Joe said quickly, uncomfortably, "—it doesn't make one scrap of difference, does it?"

She raised her eyes to his, there was a second of silence.

"Not at all," she answered then, quietly.

CHAPTER XVII

UIET! He had never seen her so quiet. She had conquered her first suffocating rush of shyness, she was sitting erect, and when he or his mother or father spoke, she answered. But he felt that he might with less cruelty have killed her. Her cheeks were very red, she held her head up, and her tortured blue eyes—those loyal, loving eyes that had held so much laughter, so much admiration and companionship for Joe Grant!—moved composedly from one face to another.

"So Joseph sails to-morrow," Mrs. Merrill said, with a vague, opaque look for Maggie and a perfectly expressionless mask behind it for Joe.

"Perhaps," Joe said, disagreeably. His little surprise had fallen flat; he felt a perfectly unjustifiable sensation of anger against his mother, an anxious need to save Maggie from her, somehow—get the poor kid out of this, somehow—have the whole miserable business over somehow—and then apologize and make

the peace with her as best he might.

Her look told him that he had betrayed her, delivered her, bound and helpless, to her enemies. "I trusted you—I loved you when you were a shabby, dirty errand clerk, beside me in a cheap store," said Maggie's eyes, "and all the time you were my employer's son, ready to make fun of me, ready to shame me—when your moment came!"

She helped herself, awkwardly, unfamiliarly, to food, when it was presented at her left elbow on the big platters. But he noted with a real pang of shame and concern that she hardly touched it. Amazement, bewilderment, shock still held her in a sort of trance; she was like a person partially under a heavy drug. She emptied her water glass more than once, merely glanced incuriously at the wine the headwaiter presently poured for her.

"Would you ask the help if I could have some more water?" she said once. And Mrs. Merrill said quite audibly, if in an aside, "Oh, priceless!" Joe looked down, his face dark.

"Mother-" he murmured, choking.

His mother was instantly on the defensive, eyes widened innocently at her son, eyebrows

high.

"Well, if you——" she breathed, and stopped. "If you—don't mind bringing her here for us to laugh at, don't blame me for laughing!" the significant glance finished the phrase she did not quite dare utter. It pleased her to pretend that she had not at all understood Maggie, and in an idle sort of curiosity she was quite willing to draw her out. A faint smile touched the older woman's painted mouth, and she said graciously: "I beg pardon?"

"For what?" Maggie asked innocently.

"I didn't understand what you asked for?" Mrs. Merrill persisted, mercilessly sweet.

Maggie weakened. Her blue eyes moved imploringly to Joe, her voice was barely audible.

"Water, if you please."

"Water to Miss Johnson," Mrs. Merrill said, annoyed. It was the waiter's business to see that the guest's glass was filled, but Mrs.

Merrill felt illogically irritated with the guest who had had to call attention to the omission.

The waiter, unfortunately, was enjoying the situation too much to attend to his business duties. He would presently tell his little British wife of the situation: "Mr. Joseph Merrill red in the face, Mrs. Merrill tryin' to impress this gell, d'you see?—and the young lady quite the shopgell out on a Bank 'oliday."

Consequently, even a second reminder was insufficient, and Maggie, being supplied with water, had to add:

"And a fork, please."

She said it so low, with such embarrassment, that nobody heard it. The waiter, now roused to concern, leaned closer, Mrs. Merrill turned upon her a resentful, impatient scrutiny, and Joe nervously looked from waiter to guest, anxious to save Maggie, whatever the trouble was.

"And a fork, please," Maggie repeated, audibly now. They were all looking at her, the headwaiter had come up, she knew she was doing something unforgivable, but had only a hazy idea of her offense. She had food before her—not that she wanted it! But sooner

or later someone would see that she had no fork, and there would be a fuss. "A fork for my fish," she said, clearing her throat. And because she was confused and embarrassed and self-conscious and sorry for the trouble she was causing, she added, for the attentive waiter's benefit, the polite little home phrase: "A fork—while you're up."

"While you're up!" Mrs. Merrill's lips twitched, as if unwillingly. Her sardonic, triumphant glance, as it met Joe's wretched, defiant gaze, expressed a certain reluctance to laugh at his unfortunate little humble friend, but an inability to resist the tremendous temptation.

She was not rated as an unkind woman, perhaps because the vast circle of her friends knew her so little, needed to know her so little. Society admired her for her wealth, her beauty, and her clothes; ate her food, drank her wine, cashed her bridge checks, and was satisfied. Servants and modistes were not enthusiastic about Mrs. George Merrill, but their opinion of her mattered to her not at all.

In such a situation as this to-night she could score. Not very clever, not really a gentle-

woman, she was still enough of each to snub and suppress Maggie Johnson. She enjoyed the chance. To feel herself this girl's superior, to cut her easily and carelessly in a bored, beautiful, cultivated voice gave Lillian Merrill real satisfaction.

She had been, as a girl, of that miserable and superfluous class known as shabby genteel. She had been arrogantly and stupidly reared in a house full of faded oil portraits and thin silver, worth, at most, a few hundred dollars, among idle, boastful, pompous relatives principally interested in denying each other's claims to a perch upon the branches of a long dead family tree. The atmosphere had been one of unlovely makeshifts and privations, impatiently endured; of debt, toadying, sycophancy, and all those depressing manipulations of honour, truth, and finances by which the penniless snobs of the world are enabled to live at all.

All her unmarried women cousins and sisters, under the age of thirty-nine—and there were a round dozen of them—were intent upon rich marriages; jealousy and competition ran high, and every male who came at

all within their zone, married, single, old or very young, sick or well, was estimated eagerly in the light of a possible husband.

When it was possible to impress any sort of servant into their toils for a few weeks, Lillian and her sisters did not even make their own beds. They idled about the big, gloomy, dark house that smelled of decay and coal gas, lunching frugally on toast and tea and stewed prunes, dining on potatoes and cold mutton, listening for the telephone, fighting to answer it, watching the street through a carefully adjusted drawn shade.

At twenty-five, Lillian was sharp, eager, beautiful, hungry. She fell upon George Merrill with avidity; he was a commoner, but he was rich. Harriet should have had him; Harriet was thirty-three and not critical, but he didn't happen to fancy Harriet. Lillian's sisters laughed at her "storekeeper" when they were not envying her.

"I'm to meet him to-day to pick out my automobile," Lillian could answer superbly.

"Not George Merrill of the Stores?" cousins asked merrily, knowing well that he was.

"That's just who he is. And by the way,"

Lillian would counter, with slightly reddened cheeks, "he says that, if Cousin Bob will go down to his office, he thinks he has exactly the job for him."

For he was the first real man she had ever met, and to her own surprise and confusion she had come to like him very much, to feel a strange loyalty and admiration for her commoner. His indifference to her family's ideals and opinions was—well, simply breathtaking!

In the more than twenty years of their marriage, George Merrill had changed her somewhat. He was a good, simple fellow, amazed at his own success, proud of his wife, adoring his boy.

She would always be stupid, selfish, snobbish. But in her own way she was truly devoted to husband and son. And it was a queer, aborted form of mother love and loyalty that inspired her to pillory this ridiculous guest of Joe's to-night, show him how preposterous this friendship was—how impossible.

It was at about this time, when by her brightened eyes and nervous voice, and by the two scarlet spots that blazed in her cheeks, Maggie began to show the effects of the surprise and the strain, that George Merrill suddenly took a hand in the conversation.

He had been an almost silent spectator, so far, watching his wife and his son shrewdly, sending an occasional glance toward the girl. He knew that she was stunned, dazed, harassed, and confused, and he saw her trying, almost visibly, to fight her own emotions, rise to the situation, and carry it with dignity and courage, if with no especial grace or pleasure. And he told himself that there was some good stuff in this little creature—it was too bad of Joe to have taken her so completely unawares.

"You work in the Stores, Miss Johnson?"
"In Number Seven—on Eighth. Yes, sir."

"How long have you been there? You don't look old enough to have been there very long?"

The kind, deliberate voice steadied her. She breathed easier, looked him in the eye.

"I'm eighteen. I went in nearly four years ago, when I finished Grammar. My father and mother had—considerable trouble."

Joe's heart ached for her; her steady young

serious voice, her brave, hurt eyes, her blazing cheeks were all revealing a Maggie he had never seen before.

"Your father's living, then?"

There was no pause, no faltering.

"My father's a postman."

George Merrill flushed with genuine concern; he had been trying to put her at her ease.

"Well," he said pleasantly, "I think I owe that store a debt of gratitude. My son Joe, here, seems to have gotten a lot more out of it than he ever did out of college!"

Maggie looked at him unemotionally.

"He didn't do very well there, for awhile," she admitted quietly, "but now he is doing very well—good—" she changed it again, under her breath—"very well. They all like him."

"I'm proud to hear it," George Merrill said thankfully.

"Maggie," Joe began at this point uncomfortably, "thought that I was the dumbest thing she had ever gotten hold of, didn't you, Maggie? She gave me my first start."

But he could not win her. Again the girl

looked at him dispassionately, almost as if he had not been there.

"I didn't know who he was," she explained, with a patient glance at his mother.

Something happened to Mrs. Merrill in that second. She looked at the little girl in the broad organdy collar and cuffs, with the bright hair that sprayed up under the plain little hat, and her cold, curious, and yet faintly troubled glance met the look of wide-open, faithful blue eyes, and it was in a voice unexpectedly gentle that she said:

"You had no idea who Joe was?"

"Nobody did," said Maggie.

"What did you call yourself, Joe?" his mother asked.

"Joe Grant."

There was an interruption. A dance had ended, and a girl and young man came up to the Merrills' table. Joe and his father stood up, and a waiter pulled up another chair, and the girl—perfumed and rouged and beautifully gowned—sat down negligently and easily and was introduced to Maggie Johnson. Miss Millicent Russell studied the other girl comfortably, insolently, as she talked.

"Joe, I hear you're going to Japan?"

"I may go."

"May go? Why, I thought—" said Millicent innocently, turning to Mrs. Merrill—"I thought you said something of a little goodbye dinner to-night, Mrs. Merrill? I thought he was going to-morrow?"

The colour drained from Maggie's face. Mrs. Merrill laughed uneasily as she said:

"Well, I think it is practically settled, isn't it, Joe?"

Millicent, her bright, mischievous eyes reading all their faces, changed the subject tactfully and presently went on her way. Then Maggie, in the little pause that followed the other girl's chattering and laughing good-byes, said steadily:

"I'm going to ask you will you excuse me and let me go home now, Mrs. Merrill. I oughtn't to have come—I know that. But I didn't understand. You and his father have been pretty well worried about me, maybe. But it was because I thought Joe was a poor boy—and that, if he loved her, he'd be glad to marry a girl as poor as me!—Don't speak to me, Joe," she interrupted herself to warn him,

as he stirred. And Joe's father felt his own heart stand still at the tone. "Don't ever speak to me or try to see me again," Maggie said, her voice shaking a little, her resolution holding firm. "I'm done with you—to-night. I never would have come here, ma'am," she added, to Mrs. Merrill, "I never would have given you any worry—if I had known. We were working together, only this afternoon, and he asked me would I meet his folks—" She faltered for a second, went on. "I thought maybe you and Mr. Grant were like us—I thought it'd be some little place like we have. I might have known—I might have known Joe wasn't like the rest of us!

"He'll go to Japan to-morrow," said Maggie, looking Joe full in the face, "and that's right—that's what he ought to do. And I promise you—I promise you that I'll never see him again!"

"Maggie—" Joe began, choking. His mother silenced him by laying a jewelled hand tightly upon his and turning, with her superior, quiet smile, to Maggie.

"I don't think he meant to hurt you, Miss Johnson," she said.

Maggie, who had been nervously pulling on her shabby little cotton gloves, snapped a fastener at her wrist and looked up.

"That's all right," she said in a cold, nervous voice. "I guess he didn't know how it would strike me. Will you please excuse me if I go home now?"

"Wait just a minute, won't you—Maggie?" George Merrill said.

And in his turn he laid an arresting hand

upon her arm.

The voice, grave and sympathetic and distressed, shook her, as did the touch, and the somewhat haltingly pronounced name. For the first time, she showed signs of a break.

"Maggie," Joe said pleadingly, "you know what we had planned—you know I never

meant to hurt you."

"I have to go!" she said stubbornly, blindly. And she half rose from her chair.

"Listen, Maggie—"Joe began.

But again his mother checked him.

"I think, dear, that Miss Johnson feels nervous and tired, and your deceiving her about your name and who you are has upset her. I

wouldn't say anything more about this just now, Joe."

"You don't have to come with me," Maggie said stonily, to Joe. And she turned to the older man. "Thank you, Mr. Merrill. Good-night."

And even while she said it, he saw her eyes move beyond him to the door of the room and saw her face whiten. She sank down weakly into her seat again.

The dance music had stopped, for awhile, and many of the tables were empty; waiters had carried them from the floor, so that there were vacant spaces where there had been packed chairs and plates and glasses. But the party in which Millicent Russell was prominent was still lingering about its big round table, amid the usual litter of dishes and food and crumpled napkins, and all of its members and everyone else in the room were staring, as Maggie was, at the man and woman who were somewhat hesitatingly making their way across the floor, restrained, rather than guided, by the scandalized headwaiter.

It was all like a horrible dream to Maggie, exhausted, confused, and wearied almost be-

yond bearing this fresh blow. The approaching couple were her father, diffident and bashful and frightened, and her mother, agitated and bold.

Pop's shabby old suit, baggy and limp, Pop's searching rabbit eyes and bowed, meek little shoulders, looked doubly pitiful here, and Ma, with the black veil falling impressively from the hat she had evidently assumed in great haste, and the dark hair in untidy strings beneath it, and the voluminous black cape she wore to funerals bellying about her like a sail, was the target for all the eyes in the room.

Maggie felt her mouth fill with salt water, and her throat thicken, and her legs grow weak. She said, "That's my father and mother, Joe."

Joe had the waiter once again drag two chairs to the table, and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson, obviously dazed and astonished, sat down and were introduced.

"I ast him was there someone here named Grant, and he says, 'No,' " said Mrs. Johnson. "It was just luck I happened to look in the door and seen Maggie."

Joe looked anxiously at the girl, searching

his mother's face, his father's face, with swift looks, and returned to Maggie again.

She did not return the glance. She had eyes only for her father, who was in the chair beside her. There was a look of angelic tenderness, angelic concern, in her beautiful little tired face, and her small, work-roughened little hand was laid over her father's with a reassuring pressure.

"What is it, Pop? Why'd you come?"

"I'd no idea it was like this, Maggie," her father said forlornly, as if he were ready to cry.

"Why, that's all right," the girl said, clearing her throat. "I didn't expect to come here myself, but Joe brought me. What is it, Ma?"

"Maggie, a cop just come to the house," her mother said abruptly. "That feller 'Lizabeth runs with has been arrested, and she's at the night court. Pop and me didn't know what to do! I give you my word that nothing like this has ever happened in our family before," Mrs. Johnson said, genteelly, yet in a tone of shame, to Mrs. Merrill.

"What's the charge?" George Merrill asked sharply.

Maggie, pale and terrified, had merely clutched her father's hand the tighter. Now, her tortured eyes, and all their eyes, were turned to Mrs. Johnson's face.

"They say they were speedin'," elucidated Maggie's mother, "an' Chess—my daughter's friend is named Chess Rivers—had some hootch in the car."

"Oh, Joe, what'll we do?" Maggie whispered involuntarily. But before he could turn to her she had gathered her forces together and got to her feet. "We'll have to go right to the court, Pop, and get 'Lizabeth out," she said composedly. Joe noticed that she was very white. "They won't hold her, Ma, don't cry," she added, her hand at her mother's elbow. "Come on, Ma. Good-bye, Joe. Good-night, Mrs. Merrill."

"You'll want some money!" George Merrill said suddenly. "How much have you?"

"It happens that I ain't got more than a quarter," Len Johnson said, in his reedy, troubled little voice.

"But we reely couldn't take it from you," Ma added. "I s'pose young folks will be young folks," she said to Mrs. Merrill, "and it ain't

as if Liz had been stealing or anything like that. But I thought I would drop where I stood when that cop walked in. I'm not accustomed to having my daughter get into any trouble——"

"Ma," Maggie said. And Joe's father noted that she only touched the older woman on the arm. But her mother immediately began a sort of rotary curtseying in farewell.

"Maggie—Maggie—why do you go—why do you mix yourself up in this?" Joe said wretchedly and incoherently, trying to draw her aside, catching her by the arm. "You aren't in this—what's it to you what your sister and that fellow do? Come home with us—and sail with me to-morrow—we'll be gone for months—there's no reason why they should drag you into all this. Let me talk to you! If you go, I'll go with you!"

Maggie was on her feet now, shepherding her father and mother away.

"You'll say nothing and you'll do nothing," she said, in a voice that silenced all five of her hearers. "You've done enough, Joe Grant. We aren't—your sort. We don't belong—here, in a room like this. And we do belong—together.

I'm not much—you've been laughing at me all this time, and I guess anyone who understood what was going on would laugh at me! -but I wouldn't be anything, I wouldn't have a right even to try to be ideal—if I wouldn't stick to my own folks! I don't care-" Her eves were blazing, her level, pitiless voice bored through him-"I don't care," said Maggie, trembling, "what you think of us! My father and my mother belong to me, and my sister does, and I'm as glad, Joe," she ended passionately, tears spilling from her eyes now, but her mouth steady, "I'm as glad to be done with you as you are with me!" She turned to Mr. Merrill, who had sat with a fan of big bills open in his fingers, watching her with a sort of breathless concentration. It was almost as if he were afraid that she would not dare say what she was so rapidly and furiously saying, and as if he liked to hear her.

She took three of the bills, folded them, shut

them into her flat worn purse.

"That's thirty," she said to him with a nod. "I owe you thirty. Thank you. It won't be more than that. Don't—" and, with a glance of utter contempt toward Joe, she dropped

her voice to confidence—a confidence that George Merrill, under the circumstances, found infinitely touching, between his humblest little employee and himself— "Don't let Joe follow us, Mr. Merrill," said Maggie. "I mean it. I'm never going to see him again. I'm done!"

CHAPTER XVIII

B LINDLY, swiftly, hugging her father tightly to her on one side, holding her mother's hand tight on the other, Maggie went with them from the room. She reclaimed her shabby coat, and they three went through the foyer of the big hotel and out into the cool evening darkness together. Maggie signalled a taxicab, and they all got in.

"Now, it's all right, Ma," she said, in a breathless, light voice. "We'll get Liz out, and she'll stop running with Chess after this night's work, you'll see, and may pick up someone who's worth something."

"Oh, dearie, I feel so awful that Ma and me follered you!" her father lamented.

"I don't see that we could do nothing else!" her mother said roundly. "Pa didn't have a cent, and I had about a dollar. Poor folks can't be choosers."

"I never knew Joe's folks was like that!"

the old man lamented afresh, when this had gone on for some time.

Maggie spoke lightly, soothingly again.

"Neither did I, Pop. But it's all right—and you and Mom and I are together—and everything's fine."

"But I'm afraid you'll feel bad, Maggie,"

her father faltered afresh.

"No, I won't! No, I won't! I belong with you." Her throat thickened treacherously. She stopped speaking, and began to pat her father's hand, but her head was held high, and the eyes in which the street lamps flashed and faded again were dry and brave.

The nightmare went on and on. They were in a horrible smelly wide place of benches and spittoons and harsh lights, and her mother was crying noisily, and Pop, pale and dishevelled and very quiet, was asking her, for God's sake, to stop. Maggie was pleading with a clerk, asking him to hurry a certain case, and good-naturedly enough, he did hurry it, and almost immediately a little door at the right opened, and 'Lizabeth and Chess Rivers and another girl and man came out.

The instant she saw her daring, pretty, in-

dependent sister frightened and tearful and white-faced, Maggie's heart seemed to turn liquid, and she ran across the courtroom and held out her arms, and 'Lizabeth caught her, and they cried together. And when the Judge looked down over his desk, disapproving of this confusion, Maggie, with her face wet and her lips trembling and her little arm linked tight in 'Lizabeth's, was looking imploringly up. A policeman, ranging the prisoners, told Maggie to go back and sit down, but Maggie only burst out the more imploringly:

"Oh, please—please let my sister come home! She's never run with this kind of man before—she isn't like you think—my father and mother'll die if my sister has to go to

jail."

Somebody rapped, and Maggie was silent, and the murmuring and glancing at papers went on between the Judge and the clerk. And then, quite suddenly, His Honour looked down again at Maggie, unsmilingly but very kindly, and Chess had to pay one hundred dollars' bail, and nobody else had to pay anything at all, and the charge against Elizabeth Johnson was dismissed.

Dismissed! The word flowed over Maggie's feverish heart like a stream of cool water, and she clung to 'Lizabeth, crying and laughing, and Ma and Pa laughed and cried, too, and 'Lizabeth, white-faced and quiet, stayed close beside her mother and kept saying quickly and clearly, "I'm done. I swear it, Pop. Never again. I'm done."

They were blundering toward the hall and the street, between the almost empty brown wood benches, and the hinged brown wood gates, and the spittoons, under the harsh lights, when suddenly Joe Grant—only he wasn't Joe Grant any more!—came hurriedly in, with an important-looking sergeant of police, and came up to them.

"Everything all right?" Joe said anxiously and quickly, looking keenly at Maggie. But Maggie was so utterly, so overwhelmingly glad to see lean, handsome, dark-faced Joe in this place of horror, and a friendly face among all the stern cold ones, that she couldn't speak, and it was Ma who said rather tremblingly:

"Thank you, yes. It was a mistake. We're

just goin' home."

"Quite a fam'ly party," said Chess Rivers

sneeringly, coming up.

And then the nightmare began again—Maggie could never remember exactly how. Lizabeth turned on Chess and told him that never as long as she lived would she go out again with a man who was a bootlegger, and blamed it on the girls who went with him, and Chess said something quick and ugly about the Johnsons not being able to put on airs, with Maggie Johnson running around the way she did with a millionaire—Chess had recognized Joe that very first day, at the cottage, because he used to see Joe at the boxing matches.

Maggie remembered crying out:

"But I didn't know who he was, Chess! And now—of course—we're not going to be married!" and she remembered Chess saying, "I'll tell the world you're not going to be married. But I guess he's got what he wanted!"

Then Chess was lying on the dirty marble floor, with blood on his cheek, and Joe was looking quite tall and calm and proud, but a little breathless, with two policemen holding his arms, and Chess, from the floor, was shouting:

"Young Merrill! That's who he is. Merrill of the Stores. And he's been—"

Maggie couldn't hear it. She saw a young man take some yellow paper from his pocket and begin writing on it. And as Chess, still shouting, got to his feet, Joe jerked loose and sent him spinning again, and that time the policeman gripped Joe again and walked him away, and a third policeman began to shove Chess roughly out of the room. The clerk took the Johnsons out through a big greasy swinging door, and they were in the dark street again.

All a nightmare. All a nightmare. And yet, as the endless night wore by, she began to be afraid she would never wake up.

They got home, somehow—partly walking, partly in a street car. And they sat in the kitchen, and Maggie made tea. 'Lizabeth, looking very young and innocent somehow, with her hair tumbled and her face tear-stained, sat beside her mother, and talked, and cried, and made promises about cigarettes and

drinks and motor cars. Pa sat listening, anxious and intent, until suddenly he was asleep, in the rocker. Ma was wakeful and majestic and moralizing.

And somehow Maggie stood on her feet, and cut bread, and poured tea, and filled the kettle for Ma's hot-water bag, and put the dishes neatly in the sink.

"Maggie, for goodness' sake, how did you feel when you learned that your friend was really Joe Merrill? I never will get that straight," said Liz, when an hour or two of the soothing home atmosphere had somewhat revived her.

"Oh, all right."

"Maggie, if you get him we're fixed for life," Liz said eagerly.

Maggie snapped a damp tea towel, hung it on a line, glanced about the spotless kitchen.

"I won't," she assured her sister.

"Maggie—why do you act so funny about it? As far as my shaming you to-night goes, why, I didn't do anything that all the girls of his crowd aren't doing every day!" Liz pleaded eagerly. "And if he makes that an excuse for breaking his engagement—"



"GEE, MA, THE BOAT GOES IN SEVENTEEN MINUTES! DO YOU S'POSE I CAN MAKE IT?"



"I'll sue him," said Ma heavily. "Here in this kitchen he sat, last Sunday afternoon, and tole me with his own mouth——"

"You don't have to sue him!" Liz said. "He's crazy about her. Isn't he, Maggie?"

Maggie's face was ashen, and her small figure appeared about to collapse. She stood, slightly wavering, with her back to the sink. Her organdy collar and cuffs were sadly crumpled now, and her rich braids had slipped almost to her shoulders.

"I wasn't listening, Ma. I'm sorry, Liz, but

I'm going to bed."

"I'm going to sit up with Ma," said 'Lizabeth. Their topic was good for several more hours of exclamation, analysis, and debate.

Maggie bent over the rocker.

"Hah!" said Pop, yawning, looking up.

"It's midnight, Pop. Come on—you've got to get to bed. Don't settle down again, Pop."

"Hello! All up?" Pop said bewilderedly. "I had an awful dream, Maggie. I dremp' you wasn't here—an' I couldn't find you nowhere."

Her little arm was about him. Her voice was exhausted, but always tender to him.

"No, I'm right here, Pop. I'm going to take care of you—always and always!"

Mrs. Johnson and her oldest daughter slept late the next morning. They reached the kitchen together at about ten o'clock, having had not more than five hours of rest, and began at once on the leisurely breakfast that Maggie, as usual, had left ready to heat. There were cups on the table, and coffee in the pot, and bread was sliced; there was a fat little bottle of cream, and Maggie had left half the mixture of an omelette waiting in a yellow bowl.

'Lizabeth was the one who first found time to pick up the newspaper, and her involuntary horrified "Oh, God!" caused her mother, startled, to join her at the stove. They read it together.

It was all there. Joseph Merrill's picture, on the front page, was embellished, in a rococo border, with a sketch representing two silhouetted youths fighting in a courtroom, with horrified women fleeing in every direction.

Young Merrill, said the newspaper, who

had left college some months before, in disfavour with his family, had been entangled, last night, in a courtroom brawl with a bootlegger and a woman.

"It'll just about kill Maggie!" said 'Liza-

beth, aghast.

"Go on readin', Liz."

"'... young Merrill, who, as far as could be ascertained, has been masquerading, since his departure from college, as a day labourer, and who, according to reports, has acquired an enviable acquaintance with the city's underworld, was detained without bail and spent the night in the city jail. At an early hour this morning, efforts to reach his father at the country place at Elmingdale were met with th' continued on page four column three ..." 'Lizabeth read rapidly. "Oh, Ma," she broke off to say in horror, "isn't this something terrible? He was in jail all night."

She rustled the paper agitatedly, folding it, searching it. Mrs. Johnson listened with a frightened face. Her eyes were so intent upon her daughter that she merely groped for her coffee-cup, buttered her bread without looking

down at it.

And suddenly, in their midst, was Pop. He had come home for his early Saturday lunch; he was as shocked as themselves.

"Where's Maggie?" he asked apprehen-

sively. "Did she see the paper?"

"She's at the store, of course," Ma answered

disapprovingly.

"The store was closed to-day. They're puttin' in the automat. She must—" Pa said vaguely—"she must of went out!"

Ma's look merely said: "You're a fool!"

But neither woman spoke.

"The paper wasn't here when I left this mornin'," pursued Pa uneasily. "An' Maggie—she looked kinder pale, but she said she hadn't been crying none. Maggie said she wasn't goin' out. Where do you s'pose she could of went?"

"Maybe she just went to market," Ma sug-

gested, in a pause.

"Maggie wouldn't never do anything—'des'prit——" 'Lizabeth was beginning, when Maggie herself came in.

She came in quietly, through the kitchen door, and stood looking at them as if she were surprised to find them all there together. Her

plain little new suit was brushed and trim—the homespun upon which Maggie's heart had been set for weeks before she really dared to spend the necessary dollars on it. Her cheeks were red, but her beautiful eyes looked tired and were set in delicate shadows.

"Fevven's sakes, where've you been? You had Ma and me worried," 'Lizabeth said.

"I went downtown.—Better turn those sausages, Pa," Maggie said briefly.

"That ain't no way to answer your sister!" Mrs. Johnson observed sharply, anxiety having strained her temper.

"Well," Maggie expanded quietly, "I went to see Mrs. Merrill."

"Yes, you did, after us being responsible for her son being in jail," 'Lizabeth jeered. But there was no unbelief in her eyes.

"What'j' do that for?" demanded the

"There was something I wanted to talk to her about, Ma," Maggie said wearily.

"What?" The question was shot, like a bullet.

"Joe," the girl said simply. And she sat

down at the table and leaned her forehead wearily on her hand.

"You never had the gall to do that, Maggie Johnson," 'Lizabeth whispered, impressed.

"Oh, yes, I did. I told her where Joe was, and they sent over to the jail, and Joe came in while I was there. And him and his father and mother and me talked it all over."

"Maggie!" It was the older sister. "Don't he like you any more?"

Maggie was quiet; she looked at her sister in a puzzled sort of way.

"He says he loves me," she said, dully.

"Oh, Maggie—fevven's sakes! Joe Mer-rill!"

"And because he loves me," Maggie said deliberately, "he's going to sail this morning for Japan. He sees that he'd only hurt me and make it harder here. His father was all for him staying here and us getting married right away. But his mother—she told us all what we'd have to do. She wants Joe to go off—now—in a few minutes, before everyone's talking of him and me and the fight, and she wants me to promise not to write to him—our engagement is broken, all right! And she says if I'll

study, and maybe kind of get on in the world, all this scandal of being in the newspaper will die away, and Joe's friends will forgive him and maybe be kind to me."

Her shamed, hopeless voice died away. She shook herself, looked about the kitchen as if she were making herself see it, and tied a limp big apron about her small waist.

"So I guess I'd better do these dishes," she said.

"He'll forget you before he's past the Heads!" her mother predicted, in the awful silence that followed.

"You can't depend on them rich people, dearie," her father, sorrowful and sympathetic, said timidly.

"Maggie, they just got him to say he'd do that so's to break it off!" 'Lizabeth said indignantly.

Maggie looked at them all apathetically. "I know all that. I know he loves me now, but that they're going to kill it, if they can. I know his ship pulls out in twenty minutes and that I'll never see him again," she said simply. "But—" she glanced from one to the other—"with things here like they are," she said, "and

Ma like she is, and Pa like he is, and you like you are, Liz—what can I do? I've worked, I've tried to make myself look good, and I've gone to night school, and I've lived the ideal life—but it doesn't seem to work, for me. If Joe had been what I thought he was, we could have climbed up together. But he wasn't, and I guess his mother's right—I guess the time is coming when he'll think of me as only a girl he knew whose mother wasn't very strong, and whose father was a postman, and whose sister ran with a bootlegger that got us all pretty nearly into jail!"

She did not cry, she spoke evenly and gently, almost without expression. But at the finish she reached up suddenly to the shelf above the sink, and snatched from its position the ideal leaflet, with its cryptic message: "The way to begin living the ideal life is—to begin."

Maggie looked at it a minute, and her face worked oddly. Then, quite quietly and composedly, she tore it into tiny scraps and fluttered them into the wet sink. And after that she walked slowly from the room, and they heard her bedroom door close behind her. There was the silence of absolute consternation in the kitchen for a long, long while. 'Lizabeth and her father and mother were so still that, after a minute, they could hear a terrible sound, a sound not often heard in the Johnson cottage.

They could hear the rending, grinding sound of Maggie sobbing bitterly, deeply, as a child sobs and as if her heart would break.

The three exchanged glances, and presently 'Lizabeth said slowly: "It seems like we have the worst luck of any fam'ly in this city."

Her mother took the theme up readily.

"Well, you girls are just beginnin' to realize what I've been sayin' for ten years! Everything goes wrong with us, and it seems like other folks have all the breaks. My gooniz," said Mrs. Johnson, readily assuming the rôle of martyr, her voice rising to a familiar drone, her words fairly flowing, "if I could do things for my children—it'd give me more pleasure than anything else in the world! It's no satisfaction to me to have poor Maggie shamed and held down by poverty—they say poverty's no disgrace, but sometimes

it seems like it's the poor gets the rotten end of it in this world."

She paused uneasily. And in the silence they could hear the bitter sobbing again. It stopped for a few instants, only to break out afresh—"Oo—oo—oooo!"

"He's a dirty scut to treat her like that!" 'Lizabeth said hotly.

"You might know those Merrills would do that—what are they but nuvo reaches!" Mrs.

Johnson added indignantly.

"If you ask me," the daughter offered, after an interval when nothing was heard but the sound of grief in the next room, "it was Maggie that laid down the law. I'll bet she was the one that said, on account of her family, that she'd never marry him!"

"Well, maybe it's all for the best. He might have treated her mean and shamed her, after a few years!" Mrs. Johnson said piously. "Anyway, to tell you the honest truth, I don't know how we could have gotten along without her. It seems like it's God's will that some should have everything and others nothing."

Pop, up to this point, had been silent, as Pop generally was. He had been making a meal of sausages and warmed-up potatoes and warmed-up coffee, at the end of the kitchen table, only occasionally turning his faded, patient eyes from the speaker's face to another, and wincing quite visibly when a violent burst of sobs interrupted the steady crying in Maggie's room.

Now, suddenly, he rose to his feet and dashed to the ground the striped tea cloth he had been using as a napkin.

"Maggie!" he shouted.

Mrs. Johnson and 'Lizabeth regarded him with amazement and some little trepidation—was Pop having a fit?—and Maggie's feet could instantly be heard, and the bang of a door.

Immediately she was in the kitchen, her face flushed and swollen from tears, her cheeks shining and wet, her beautiful hair tumbled and loose on her shoulders. Her hand held the knob of the door behind her, her eyes were fixed in bewilderment and fright upon her father.

"Maggie, we've had enough of this!" said Leonard Johnson, in a loud, authoritative voice. "I can't stand no more of it, and I ain't a-goin' to! You take that towel there and wash your eyes and fix your hair. And, Liz, you pack your sister some clothes! She's got seventeen minutes—if that clock's right—to catch the steamer, and she's goin' to catch it! She's goin' to get married on board to-day, or maybe in San Francisco or Los Angeles to-morrow or next day—you help her out there, Ma. Quick, now—while I 'phone for a taxi!'

CHAPTER XIX

EN, are you crazy?" Ma began royally. But Pop, crazy or not, was at least unafraid.

"You quit talking, Minnie," he said sharply, "and get up and stir yourself. She's done everything for the whole crowd of us since she was big enough to walk, and it's about time we got in and did something for her! Here, dear, sop your eyes good—the air'll fix 'em anyway," Pop said tenderly, solicitously, to Maggie, guiding her to the sink, switching on the cold water, the furious glare in his eyes as he looked at the other women in curious contrast to the gentleness of his voice when he addressed her. "In this envelope is my halfmonth's pay, dearie," he said.—"You keep your mouth closed, 'Lizabeth, till I give you leave to speak!" Pop interpolated fiercely-"and you can get yourself some clothes first place you stop. Hurry up there, Ma-the taxi's li'ble to get here any minute."

"Len—it seems like I'm going to faint," said Mrs. Johnson, pausing pathetically in the act of rushing Maggie's black silk dress and her new shoes into a suitcase and adding 'Lizabeth's best nightgown and the Chinese wrap-

per she herself had won at a fair.

"Well, you faint, then, but let me get Maggie off first!" Len said briskly and heartlessly. "That's right—that's right, Maggie—you look good now, dearie. It isn't that we haven't appreciated all you've done for us, dear," said the little man gently, crying openly as he helped her into 'Lizabeth's new coat, and hovered about her while she pulled down her hat with shaking fingers, "but I guess we've kinder took you for granted, Maggie. You go off now and marry your man-and forget us for awhile. And when you come back, you're going to come back to a diff'rent fam'ly-your father promises you that! Ma and Liz are going to get in and keep this place ideel, Maggie, and we ain't going to hear no more of bootleggers, nor night courts either, in this fam'ly. Liz can do like I say or she'll find herself in the street, from now on; and Ma can cook up those budgets and keep these

dishes washed up, or I'll know the reason why. I'm goin' over to that River Street contractor this very afternoon and make a first payment on one of those two-fam'ly houses——"

"Len, don't yell that way!" Ma said, weeping as she put on her black-veiled hat. "I'll do just like you say! I was always for keeping my house genteel, until my health gave way."

"Pop-I never meant anything," Liz fal-

tered, in tears.

"And we ain't going to miss you, Maggie, and we ain't going to slump," Len interrupted the frightened chorus to say loudly. "Now, you come on out—put your gloves on in the taxi—we ain't got but fourteen minutes."

Laughing, crying, but always clinging tight to this newly found and amazing parent, Mary Margaret had only time to leave a hysterical good-bye with the dog, and the cat, and the beloved, despised, shabby kitchen, with its cooling coffee and congealing sausages and limp dish towels and greasy sink.

Then they were all four jammed into a taxi, and racketing through the Saturday morning streets, past the church and the mar-

ket, down the schoolhouse way—among the warehouses——

Their talk was incoherent—inconsequential—monosyllabic.

"Can he make it?"

"He says he doesn't know. Depends on the traffic on River Street."

"This ain't exactly an ideel weddin', dearie."

"Ah, don't, Pop. You'll make me cry!"

"Driver, we goin' to make it?"

"How much time have we?—Lean forward there, Pop, and see can you see the clock at Rubenstein's?"

And then, down outside the big free-market, suddenly the agony of a halt.

An officer's imperative whistle and a bluecoated figure approaching. And Maggie's whole small being sick with fear. They couldn't possibly make the boat if they must lose five minutes here!

"Gee, this is tough, maybe I was hittin' it up a little!" the driver, already captive to his smallest passenger, said regretfully. The four Johnsons were silent with consternation.

But Ma, even though speechless, was not

entirely without resources. She dismounted from the taxi, met the policeman, and as an interested little crowd gathered, and before that officer could speak, fainted from sheer emotion, heavily, into his arms.

"She's all right—go on," Pop said in an undertone. And with no further encouragement the driver did indeed go on, turned a corner, and was plunging through traffic again.

Maggie sat back on the seat, holding Liz's hand, beginning to breathe again.

"Pop, can we make it?"

"We could, dearie, if nothing else happens," Pop was beginning doubtfully, when another whistle, this time a soothing long breath, as of relief, interrupted him, and the driver, muttering something unintelligible that sounded like a prayer, turned in to a curb, stopped the car, and uttered aloud the single disgusted word, "Flat."

But before the remaining passengers had fairly grasped the full horror of the event, 'Lizabeth Johnson had sprung from the machine, hailed another taxi that was fortunately in sight, pushed her father and sister into it, and shouted feverishly: "To the Allegria. Dock Seventeen. Quick, now! I'll stay here and pay this man, Pop," she said, hurrying them on. "Good-bye, Maggie darling, forgive me if I've been mean to you, and have a good time, and don't worry."

Then Maggie and her father were rushing on again; they had reached the piers at last, Pier Eleven, Pier Thirteen—still so far to go! And they could see the big clock saying that the hour had come and gone. It was three minutes past eleven.

Maggie turned deadly white, but she managed an agonized smile of reassurance for her father.

"That's all right, Pop. We did our best!"

"Maybe they didn't sail on the minute," said the new driver encouragingly. "I've seen 'em twenty minutes late!"

"Oh, go on, then—go on!" the girl said feverishly.

"I can't go no faster than this, lady!" the driver said, hurt. "There ain't many of these cars can jump over or under trucks, you know. You'd do better to take your little suitcase and run for it."

"Do that, Maggie!" said the newly authoritative and decisive man who was her father. "I'll stay with him, dear. Look out where you go—ah, God bless you, my darling!"

"God bless you-and thank you, Pop dear-

est!" she whispered.

Her wet face was against his for a second, the full soft rosy cheek pressed the little drab wrinkled one. Then Maggie was running—running like mad toward the big arched entrance that said, "Pier Seventeen." A baggage boy had caught her bag and coat, and was running along beside her. Crates, trucks, staring strangers all went by her like a flash, and she smelled tar, and raw coffee, and bale rope, and sea-water.

"The Davenport Line, miss?"

Her mouth was salty, the world turned black.

"No-the Allegria!"

"Oh——" And his feet stopped, and hers, too, and they stared blankly at each other. "She's sailed, miss; she went out on time, this morning," the boy said. "That's her—out there in the bay. She's just about under her own steam, now. It's eighteen past eleven, miss."

As in a dream, Maggie stood still, on the rough, thick, splintery boards of the dock, and looked through the great arched opening, and saw the vessel, balanced like a beautiful great swan, not moving now, but far out on the blue water.

"The pilot's going to drop her any minute, now, miss. Ain't that a shame!" said the bag-

gage boy sympathetically.

The girl did not stir. Her eyes were fixed on the Allegria, her hands clasped. And she was conscious of a wish that she might be far, far under the deep, dirty water that was churning slowly among the piles beneath her, that hideous unfriendly water on which orange peels and chaff and peacock-hued circles of oil were idly rising and falling.

Somebody touched her arm, and she looked up and saw it was Joe's father. With him was Joe's mother; she had been crying, and his father's face looked grave, and his lashes were

wet, too.

But Maggie did not cry. She gulped, and her wan little face twisted into a smile as she said simply:

"I was going with him. I couldn't-I

couldn't bear it. But it seems-he's gone."

"You were going with him!" his father said, sharply. "But—but you said this morning—when I tried to persuade you to consider it—you said your family—that they couldn't spare you."

"My family has—changed," Maggie told him, in a weary, exhausted little voice, her eyes again fixed on the *Allegria*, "and—I—and I sorter felt that I couldn't live—without Joe," she added, half to herself.

"My God, what a mess we've made of this!" George Merrill said.

"George, I don't honestly think he'll go—after that last scene, just as we said 'good-bye,' "Mrs. Merrill said anxiously. "It's my opinion that he'll come back from San Francisco or Los Angeles—really it is. You remember, George?—he said he didn't mind the newspaper notoriety, he didn't mind the night in jail—he felt that—that Mary Margaret here was all his luck—that nothing would ever go right in his life without her—you heard that, George? He'll not go. We'll talk it all over—we'll make a fresh start . . "

George Merrill, half listening, but assim-

ilating every word, and adding his own thoughts as well, started suddenly, as if out of a dream.

"Here!" he said. "Where are the launches, boy?—Mayne's launches—they're somewhere around here! This girl and boy aren't going to be any use apart, Lillian," he said to his wife, smiling, yet blinking tears from his eyes. "Let 'em both go off to Japan and console each other!"

He was hurrying them along the dock, and Maggie found her hands filled with big green bills from Joe's father, and found herself kissing him, and liking the firm, fatherly embrace, and—much more amazing!—received a perfumed, powdery, half-crying kiss from Joe's magnificent mother, too.

"Here, we won't go along—we'd only complicate—buy yourself what you need—tell Joe to cable—God bless you, little girl, he'll

take good care of you!"

She was helped into a dancing little launch, the dirty surface of the water was bubbling close beside her, now, they were turning, they were cutting away from the city, away from the Johnson kitchen, and Ma fainting in the free-market, and Liz settling with the taxi driver in Chinatown, and Pa caught in the traffic on the waterfront. They were cleaving a straight track toward the big liner, and Maggie, leaning over the bow of the launch, was straining toward it, was clapping her two hands over her head to attract its attention, to hold it one minute—one half-minute more!

The pilot's tug was alongside, ready to cast off from the sheer great side of the steamer; a rope ladder dangled from the high steerage deck of the one, to curl loosely among the hatches and marlinspikes of the other.

And everyone who could find a place at the long rails, first cabin, tourist cabin, steerage alike, had crowded there to see what was going on.

They saw a launch racing out from the city, and a small girl standing bare-headed—for she had lost her hat—in the launch, an aureole of gold blowing about her head, and her hands clasped high above it, like the hands of a small martyr at the stake.

And suddenly, in their own ranks, on the steamer's decks, there was a corresponding commotion, and a tall, lean boy, with a des-

perate and anxious look upon his face, broke through them, ran down a companionway, and another companionway, to the break in the railing where the pilot's ladder hung, and shouted:

"Wait a minute, down there! I've got to go back! Don't take that ladder down—wait a minute!"

Then—so quickly that even during the whole long voyage, with the blissful young bride and groom affording a reminder before their very eyes, some of the passengers couldn't remember in exactly what order it all occurred—then the flying launch had reached the pilot's tug, and the boy had descended the rope ladder, and the girl had sprung from the launch to the tug, and there was a double scream of "Maggie!" and "Joe!" and the two young things were in each other's arms, and crying—not but what everyone else was crying, too.

"I couldn't leave you, darling—I couldn't go off without my girl! I was coming back!" the boy was heard to say huskily.

And the girl said only, "Joe—Joe—Joe!"
They stood there on the rocking tug for

whole minutes—minutes—minutes, and the world looked on, and laughed, and wiped its eyes, and they neither knew nor cared. And it was only when the great *Allegria* actually blew her whistle and the little tug blew hers that Joe put his arm about Mary Margaret Johnson and said, dazedly and happily, without moving his hungry eyes from her exquisite and radiant face:

"Come on, darling, we've got a lot to dowe've got to start to Japan, and get married, and have lunch, and talk, and everything!"

And then they negotiated the rope-andplank ladder, and the passengers made an aisle across the deck for them, and a sweet, tall, motherly woman who had known Joe since he was a baby and who had had a long talk with Joe's father that very morning, put her arm about Maggie and said sweetly and kindly and slowly to her—for it was obvious that Maggie was in a dream:

"I'm going to take charge of you, dear, and arrange everything. I'm an old friend of the Captain, and he'll do everything we ask him to."

"We're going to have a wedding, some time

this afternoon," Joe said excitedly, and proudly and youthfully, to the lingering groups that simply couldn't disperse in the face of this fascinating drama and comedy in one. "And you're all invited!"

"Oh, thank you—thank you—thank you!" Maggie whispered, shrinking back against Mrs. Watson Saterlee's kindly form, as the clapping and the laughter and the good wishes began on all sides. Her eyes were dewy, she was a little pale, her trembling mouth quivered with smiles.

"Take her round to deck, Joe, and show her everything, and then bring her to me—I'm in the Lafayette Suite," said Mrs. Saterlee, and Joe and Maggie walked off, in a dream, and Joe—in a dream—kept his arm about her. And Joe showed her boats and ropes and writing rooms and dining rooms and a Japanese baby in the steerage and his own big cabin—their cabin, with its bath.

"You'll hear the bugle for lunch, soon," he exulted, as the cool sweet ocean airs began to blow over the ship, and she careened slightly, and the colour was whipped into Maggie's face, and the gulls and the city dropped far-

ther behind—and farther behind—and farther behind. "You don't mind that rocking? You're a wonder! You're going to love it, at sea, Mary Margaret Johnson Merrill."

"I shouldn't wonder if it's the ideal life, Joe," said Mary Margaret.



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